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Hannah Arendt's Unintended Quest for the Practical Dimension of Universality

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ABSTRACT The purpose of this article is to make apparent Hannah Arendt's thought on the practical dimension of universality alluded throughout her works. The issue of universality has been one of the most pivotal questions in political philosophy until today. Beneath of her philosophical endeavor there is always her deep concern for it. In this article I will show the practical dimension of universality unintentionally pursued by Arendt and its political implications. By harshly criticizing Plato Arendt successfully shows how violent the truth claim in the political realm can be. What Arendt is critical of is the attitude to dictate philosophical ideals in political realm, the attitude I named the "Philosopher King Complex." Arendt's bitter criticism of this attitude makes believe that she is critical of any claim of universality in the political realm, but her praise of Socrates clearly shows that she does not altogether blame the claim itself. We also need to note the debate with Gershom Scholem. Scholem's charge that Arendt dealt with the Eichmann case from a humanitarian, universalistic viewpoint while neglecting the Jewish perspective could be serious considering Arendt's emphasis on the pariah's perspective. Arendt's standpoint, however, includes both a particularistic view as a Jew and a universalistic view as a human at the same time. This is possible because Arendt correctly understood the role of speech. Arendt's use of Pastor

Grueber's example in Eichmann in Jerusalem implies that she believes in the power of speech to relate our consciousness to reality and to make communication possible. To retain human plurality along with universality, it is necessary but not sufficient to focus on speech alone. In this regard we learn a lesson from the Habermas-Henrich debate: that self-relation of consciousness plays the role of establishing self-identity. A successful example of combining these two insights is Arendt's position since she delivered her hermeneutic insights in the language of philosophy of consciousness. Albrecht Wellmer's unjustifiable charge of Arendt's concept of judgment to be "mystic" is an example of misunderstanding of her peculiar position. If we admit this, we can say that Arendt establishes a position to give an answer to the question "is democracy a universal truth?": democracy, as far as it is a political truth, is neither equivalent to a universal truth as a mathematical one, nor just a particular cultural opinion of westerners. This interpretation of Arendt puts her position near to liberal-communitarian views of Michael Sandel or Charles Taylor. Sandel criticizes Arendt to be universalistic, but in fact his position is quite near to hers. For example, his method of analogy is almost the same as her concept of exemplary validity. Rather, it seems to me that Arendt provides more solid theoretical ground than Taylor or Sandel does. For Arendt's position stands on a firm understanding of the power of speech and on an insight of self-relation of consciousness.

I. Introduction

After getting my Ph.D. degree I came back to South Korea, and I found that in Korea Arendt's thought was not studied so well. So I had to take the role of an introducer of her thought, and the job was done at both theoretical and practical level. On theoretical level, I became a translator of her books. At that time <The Human Condition> <On Revolution> and <Men in Dark Times> were what we could get as Korean translations, and even worse, the latter two books were translated long time ago and were out of print. And the translation of <The Human Condition> was not good enough to recommend it. So I translated several books and other devoted Arendt scholar did the same, and we have almost of her major books in Korean. My articles on Arendt were mainly explaining how important her concepts and thoughts are. After 6 years have passed since then, we had a

conference on Hannah Arendt's thought to celebrate her 100 birthday on her birthday where we had 10 presentation of papers and about 150 audiences.

In the meantime I also tried to interpret her though as a kind of justification of civil society, that is, NGOs as the third sector of a society. Koreans experienced a very dynamic process of democratization from the middle of the last century. From early 1990s we had several very strong NGO movements along with labor movement. In 1970s and 1980s civil movement and labor movement were combined to protest against Park Jung-Hee's dictatorship, but since the mid-80s they were separated and walked their own ways. Labor movement could be justified by Marxist ideologies, but the only theoretical background given for the civil movement was from Antonio Gramsci's philosophy. And I wanted to use Hannah Arendt's thought for this purpose.

And it was after the collapse of the Soviet Union and East-European communist regimes, and in Korea many of the former Marxists were converted into Habermasians. Thus, my academic front was also set against Habermas. Of course this expression is somewhat exaggerated. But anyway, part of my academic work was devoted to explaining the difference Habermas and Arendt especially in terms of their concepts of communication.

While doing these kind of job, I wanted to capsule one of her thoughts and I coined an expression "the philosopher king complex," which I will explain soon. And also I learned a way to put her thought in the context of contemporary Korean political discourses one of which is the debate between liberalism and communitarianism. In this way I came up with this idea of "Hannah Arendt's unintended quest for the practical universality" as I put as the title of my presentation.

2. Universality matters

The question of universality, or the question of universalization, has taken a central position in political discourse. The claim to universality

is included in the truth claim in metaphysics and other areas, and it sometimes took the shape of the justification of knowledge or moral command as we see in Kant.

In order to secure the universality in political realm Plato brought the idea of philosopher king into political discourse. Philosopher is supposed to be a wise man, a beholder of the intelligible world of ideas and the knower of truth. He is supposed to give an idea of how to construct a state, and his idea is again supposed to be true. Universality will be secured in the truth claim made by the philosopher king,

We can criticize this project of Plato by posing the fallibility of any person, but it is an easy approach. A focus needs to be given on whether it is still problematic even if the philosopher king is infallible in suggesting true political principles. This is what Hannah Arendt did against Plato by separating Plato's view from Socrates'.

As Plato thinks, the state that follows the philosopher king's idea may gain harmony and security, and secure justice in it. What lacks in this picture is, however, a consideration of the fact that human beings are naturally political animals. The fact of human plurality is now at risk in Plato's project.

Plato who watched his teacher's trial and death powerlessly now wanted to make the power hidden in truth to be explicit. *Plato's philosopher king suggests the political truth that can solve all political problems caused by the fact of human plurality by simply neglecting it. The mentality of those who believe that this kind of political principle is possible by means of philosophical contemplation is what I want to call "the philosopher king's complex." Those who hold this complex is destined to put him/herself and all the related others into danger. The philosopher king complex has been heavily laden in later tradition of political theory. The list of the holders of this complex includes Karl Marx, Stalin, Lenin, and Polpot, and Kim Il-Sung, and Kim Jung-Il. It also*

includes the designer of "island" as we see in the Hollywood movie "Island."

While opposing the truth claim of the philosopher king, then, does Hannah Arendt oppose the universality in political realm entirely? I would say, "not at all." It is why she separates Socrates from Plato. Socrates respects each individual's opinion which expresses his/her identity. Political realm is the common place where people express their opinions and attain others' consent. Opinion (*doxa*) is not something opposite to truth. It contains what appears to me (*dokei moi*), and it is different from "one truth" and also from "false idea." It is not a subjective fantasy or a certain arbitrary thing, and not an absolute truth or something valid to everybody either. ("Socrates" p.14) Opinion is where people can find their own truth, and what Socrates did was to help them to think themselves.

What Hannah Arendt tries to get through her critique of Plato's project of philosopher king and at the same time through her critique of the philosopher king complex is to secure what is contained in the universality claim in political realm. This is what I want to call "the practical universality." To persuade (*logon didonai*) people, not to impose the truth to them, is how to establish the practical universality. And the ground of the success of persuasion is not a universal humanity, that is, man in singular, but concrete human beings, that is, men in plural.

We see this more clearly in her treatment of Immanuel Kant. She did not use Kant's second critique for her political thought because the book deals with man in singular who belongs to the realm of intelligible beings. Instead she used the third critique where Kant deals with men in plural, who is earthbound creature, living in communities, endowed with *sensus communis*. Justification of political judgment is not made based on truth claim, but instead it comes from its communicability, and its communicability again comes from *sensus*

communis, a community sense. Here again we can see what Hannah Arendt tries to do. It is to secure the practical universality while avoiding truth claim or theoretical universality, and relativism.

The concept of universality is pivotal also in the debates between liberalism and communitarianism. John Rawls proposes two principles of justice to get a universal agreement by putting a veil of ignorance by which all the particularities of participants are put aside. Whether this abstract person or the unencumbered self is receivable is the point that Michael Sandel and Charles Taylor try to examine. Richard J. Bernstein said that Hannah Arendt cannot be a communitarian but at the same time she cannot be a liberal either, and I believe this is all about the status of universality in Arendt's thought. I believe that her position is very similar to liberal-communitarian, and this means that what these people share is the same goal, that is, the practical universality.

3. Why practical universality?

The idea of practical universality is not new. It is what Charles Taylor tried to get through his cultural dialogue, and it may be what John Rawls tried to get through his conception of reflective equilibrium. In case of Hannah Arendt, it is what she tried to get through her conceptions of political judgment, persuasion, *sensus communis*, etc.

To get the exact idea of practical universality I would like to introduce a story that touches the issue of the status of Korean residents in Japan. Chosun which was the name of country in Korean peninsula was annexed with Japan. After the annex many people went to Japan either voluntarily or with force. Liberation came in 1945, but there was no Chosun anymore. In the meantime Korean peninsula was divided into two parts according to the Yalta Agreement by the powers for trusteeship. Before the establishment of the two Koreas, Japan

issued the Immigration Control Law in 1947 according to which all Korean people had to register as foreigners. After the establishment of the two Koreas, they became Koreans but most of them remained in Japan but they could not get Japanese citizenship and remained as Chosun people, stateless pariahs. The procedure to get the citizenship has been too rigorous, and only a few people could get it and many remains as stateless people until now. Of course there are a lot of regulations and limit of rights put on them. The "I" in the story was better off and had many Japanese friends, but "the boy" was not. The story goes as follows.

When I was in an elementary school, I happened to see a scene that a Chosun boy was beaten severely by Japanese boys. Some bad Japanese boys surrounded the boy and beat him while calling him, "Chosen, Chosen" which is a swear word for Chosun people. The boy lived in an area of poor Chosun people and his grandmother always wore Korean traditional white costume, so he couldn't hide his identity.

I took as much courage as I could and tried hard to stop the beating while shouting "Stop violence. Don't harm to weak people! Stop bullying." Eventually the situation was settled, but I felt quite uneasy. I had only as much of courage as to say "Stop violence," a universal moral principle. I didn't have the courage to say, "Don't do this. I am a Chosen, too." I could take the risk to be beaten but I didn't want to take the risk to receive everyday discrimination from Japanese boys and girls. While I say "Don't harm to weak people", I did not put the position of the weak people which I really belong to, and so the saying was an act of hypocrisy.

The beaten boy took a glance of me momentarily while leaving, but the look was not of thanks. It was not the expression of eyes out of thanks to the person who helped. It was the same look as one for the Japanese boys who beat him. It was very natural, I thought. Even though I acted like a righteous man, but in this way I was just one of them, one of those who beat and discriminated him. Since then I pledged not to be Japanese again and again to myself.

This story clearly shows the problems that liberal solution has. Solutions based on universal stance have their own limit. Thus, the goal should not be directed toward the universal level, but toward the practical level. Solutions should be taken not from universal stance but from practical universal stance.

What I am doing with this concept of practical universality is to give a name for what we are already well acquainted with, so that it has a solid ground by having its own name. Also I am suggesting that Hannah Arendt is the best in giving a solution for political problems. The solution is judgment, or communicating judgment with built-in identity.

4. Communicating judgment with built-in identity

For Arendt it is in two different ways for words to play in thinking and have a political significance. First, words reveal personal identity. Words have the function to express a personal particularity. Each person has elements of both whatness and whoness if we use Arendt's expression. Because of this sameness and difference it is possible for us to live diverse lives in a common world. At the same time because of this difference we have many conflicts among us and need solutions for them.

The second political significance comes from the settling function of the words. Men create the world where they can make relations with

others by inquiring meanings of states of affairs. Thus, communication among plural men is made in our pursuit of the meaningful relation with the world and with others, and through communication we try to persuade others and to reach an agreement with them.

Agreement for Arendt is not based on the truth claim but on the acknowledgement of diversity or plurality of meanings. Giving and accepting other meanings always happen in a communication. This way of communication is called in Greek, *logon didonai*.

It is very helpful to compare Hannah Arendt's concept of words with Habermas's. There are several significant differences between them. First of all, Habermas conducted a paradigm change from the philosophy of the subject to the philosophy of language. He deserted the paradigm of consciousness and took that of language. So he believed that he could secure the successful explanation of the intersubjectivity which Husserl had failed to give with his philosophy of consciousness. Arendt showed us the role of words in many different places and I believe she conveyed almost all the significant functions of words that Habermas explained. One big and the most important difference between Habermas and Arendt lies in the fact that Arendt used terms and expressions coming out of the philosophy of consciousness. Thus, Albrecht Wellmer once said that if we try to understand Arendt's theory, for example, her theory of judgment, from Habermasian viewpoint, there is no significant difference between them.

I believe if we take Wellmer's point then we will lose the most important aspect of Arendt's thought. That important aspect is, I believe, what can be retained by conveying political functions of words by means of the language of the philosophy of consciousness. This will lead to the most characteristic feature of Arendt's concept of communication.

For Arendt political action is an action of a subject. Politics is constituted of the actions of the subjects who reveal their particular

identities in a public sphere and in the meantime communicate with each other. In communicating their judgments they enlarge their mentalities by using their imaginations. What is given through one's perception is represented in one's mind and what is represented in mind is conveyed in judgment and is ready to share with others. All these things happen in a person's consciousness where words work as its components. This way of communicating one's judgment, in case of successful consent, will lead to an action in concert and provoke solidity among acting subjects.

For Habermas, the objectification process is inevitable in the philosophy of the subject where epistemological model works. For it is accompanied with the objectifying of all the cognitive objects including the knowing subject him/herself. Thus, Habermas tried to show how language works in human relations and in the process of coordination of conflicting actions. If we take Habermas's arguments against the philosophy of consciousness, then it appears that we need to accept the so-called linguistic turn. However, still we need to think whether the direction from these two paradigms of consciousness and language is only one-sidedness, whether the importance of the paradigm of language is exhausted.

The debate between Habermas and Dieter Henrich is very illuminating in this regard. The debate began when Habermas criticized Henrich's article entitled "A philosophical Column: where the German philosophy goes?" in the middle of 1980s. In exchanging their critical comments on each other's view, Henrich pointed out one important merit of the philosophy of consciousness which may simply disappear in the process of the linguistic turn: it is the revelation of the conscious life (*bewusstes Leben*) coming from the self-relation of consciousness. The conscious life plays the role of giving meaning to one's life. This is how one's particular identity is constructed. One other interesting point that he makes is that even though we are

conscious of ourselves in the work of self-consciousness, the contents of consciousness does not become transparently knowable through self-reflection. He argues that there is always an unfathomable ground in self-consciousness, and for this reason one does not know oneself completely. In summary, Henrich's point here is that there always a self-relational act is going on whenever we conduct thinking, and sometimes the self-reference is not conspicuous at all.

According to Habermas, in the process of reaching mutual agreement, the dialogue participants will check the three validity claims that are inherent in a speech act and see whether they can get mutual recognition on those three claims. The three claims include whether what is expressed in a speech corresponds the objective world, conforms the intersubjectively shared world, and shows the speaker's sincerity (the inner world). In this checking process we can say that the self-reference is working. According to Henrich, my relationship to those three worlds influences in checking whether the proposed meaning is acceptable or not. Thus, we can say that, here, self-centeredness is still alive. This means that Habermas did not consider the role of self-relationship sufficiently and excluded the activity of pursuit of meaning of self-consciousness.

Habermas's negligence of the self-relating role of consciousness causes one defect in his theory, and that is a lack of sufficient consideration of solidarity. Intimate relationship between individuals occurs by means of the self-conscious life, but Habermas while neglecting this aspect of consciousness cannot fully acknowledge the nature of solidarity which makes action-in-concert possible in the time of political turmoil. This critique implies that there is a serious defect in his theory of communicative action. Habermas defines solidarity as the reverse side of justice, but that's it. No other substantial explanation is given for it.

Henrich's critique of Habermas and his explanation of the importance of the paradigm of conscious can support Arendt's seemingly incomplete exposition of the concept of communication. Considering that Arendt constantly emphasized the fact of human plurality, the revelation of identity in a political action, action-in-concert based on solidarity, we need to think Arendt's use of the language of the philosophy of consciousness more positively. According to Arendt, as we all know, revelation of plurality is possible only through words. She said that the function of words and the fact of human plurality correspond to each other.

Thus, communicating one's judgment is to communicate one's opinion with its built-in identity.

5. Conclusion: an application

The most important point that I want to make so far is that there is a big difference between the role of universality in theoretical level and that in practical level. Simple claim of universality in practical level may appear as a form of violence. One example of this difference is one of the main tenets of American neo-conservatism: Since liberal-democracy is an American value and a universal political truth, it is worth to put on a country even by force. Not many of our contemporaries believed that this was one of the real reasons to attack Iraq, but the tenet itself remained very powerful. Anyway, let's take a hypothetical situation that people in a powerful country feels a great pity on a neighboring country whose people are suffering a dictatorship. All other conditions should be neglected in this hypothetical situation and let's just focus this issue only. In this situation, is it acceptable and praiseworthy for the power to invade the small suffering country and impose a liberal democratic political system on it?

After American invasion of Iraq I saw a very conscientious scholar in Korea was puzzled with this question. I think, however, this tenet can

be successfully disputed by what we have been thinking. If we were to think it according to theoretical universality, then we can say, "why not?" However, if we think it according to practical universality, then we can say, "No way!" In the hypothetical case, the power has the attitude of the philosopher king complex. The nature of the political principle that the power tried to put on the suffering country is just a philosophically understood one which belongs to the theoretical universality. The way of imposing that political principle is one that excludes the communication with built-in identity. What if, the power just wants to do it while believing that it is the only possible way to save the poor people? Will it work? Since the attitude assumes only the theoretical universality and neglects its practical, the action cannot get its intended aim. The expected result will never come from that kind of action.

The question of universality that we have dealt with so far is not what matters in metaphysics, but in political level. Arendt's concern with particularity came from her care of individuals, and this again is to do justice to the reality of human plurality. Arendt hasn't taken the relation between particularity and universality which was taken very important by many philosophers, but in fact she has unintentionally dealt with the issue. Her unintended quest for the practical universality opens a way to communicate with others while sufficiently respecting their own identities and to live together politically.