

Truth and Reconciliation

A Combination of Kantian and Hegelian Inheritance in the Philosophy of Hannah Arendt

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die Eule der Minerva beginnt erst mit der einbrechenden Dämmerung ihren Flug.

— G. W. F. Hegel—

Reconciliation is an indispensable element in the restoration of peaceful relations following conflict. A world devoid of conflict is ideal. However, it appears to be very difficult to create such a world immediately, given our experience of wars and conflicts that have persisted since the dawn of humanity. Therefore, we must assume, for the time being, that conflicts will inevitably occur in our world, even if we are temporarily at peace. To the extent that this is the case, it is important to think about how to end conflicts in a way that allows us to re-establish a peaceful relationship, even if it is not permanent. Namely, we need to reconcile after conflicts. Certainly, reconciliation may not be a positive way to prevent future conflicts. But it will be impossible to create a peaceful world in the future if we cannot reconcile after conflicts. In this sense, reconciliation is the first step in creating a peaceful world.

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa (TRC) is such an attempt to reconcile between victims and perpetrators of apartheid. It has two aims: it aims to explore what really happened, i.e., truth, and to establish peaceful relations between victims and perpetrators, that is, to achieve reconciliation between the two parties. Accordingly, the commission's primary objective is not the punishment of perpetrators. Instead, the TRC offers amnesty in exchange for their cooperation in the investigation of the truth. Critics of the TRC contend that justice is compromised for the sake of reconciliation (Rotberg and Thompson (ed.) 2000, 22). This debate underscores a critical question in the discourse surrounding the TRC: Is truth or justice more crucial for achieving reconciliation? (Rotberg and Thompson (ed.) 2000) Some authors say that reconciliation requires corrective justice (Tosa 2023). They think that truth alone is not enough for reconciliation.

However, reconciliation without punishment as corrective justice may be possible (for example, in the form of amnesty), but reconciliation without truth seems to be difficult. We can find the reason for this in the fact that the surviving family members of an incident require often to investigate what really happened. According to them, they just want to know the truth. Therefore, we can justifiably assume that there is an essential link between

reconciliation and truth.

In this paper, I will argue that truth is an essential element for reconciliation by analyzing the philosophy of Hannah Arendt¹. “Reconciliation with the world” is one of the most important themes in her philosophical thinking (Tsushima 2016). On the one hand, the problem which she intensively struggled with through her philosophical life was totalitarianism which emerged in the 20th century. According to Arendt, totalitarianism is the most serious problem for us because it threatens our essential existence of human beings as “zoon politikon (political animal).” However, the world that let totalitarianism happen was our own world. Therefore, we must philosophically think about totalitarianism and reconcile ourselves to the world which yielded it. On the other hand, we are all born in this world. The birth is, according to Arendt, a new event in the sense of a beginning. Everyone is strange (“fremd” in German) in this world at first. Insofar as, we must reconcile ourselves to the world. In this double sense, the concept of “reconciliation” is at the center of Arendt’s philosophy².

In the following, I will firstly argue about the indispensability of truth for politics by analysis of Arendt’s essay “Truth and Politics” (Arendt 1954). Secondly, I explain the essential link between truth and reconciliation. In this case, the word “truth” means “reality” which is told as a narrative or history. Finally, I will discuss Arendt’s concept of reconciliation as understanding in her essay “Understanding and Politics” (Arendt 1954). Through this argument, we will be able to find the essential link between truth and reconciliation, where we can see Arendt’s combination of Kantian and Hegelian inheritance in her concept of reconciliation.

1. Indispensability of Factual Truth for Politics

In her essay “Truth and Politics” (Arendt 1954), Hannah Arendt discusses in detail the relation between truth and politics. It has long been known that truth and politics do not go hand in hand. In this essay, she explains its reasons and discusses the indispensability of factual truth for politics. Arendt argues that the realm of politics is limited by “those things which men cannot change at will” (Arendt 1954, 259), i.e., truth. In this section, I will focus on the character of factual truth which Arendt discusses in her essay.

The conflict between truth and politics emerged originally as the conflict between rational truth and opinion, in other words, “two diametrically opposed ways of life”: the life of philosopher and the life of citizen (Arendt 1954, 228). The philosopher concerns truth, that is, unchangeable permanent things, whereas politics, i.e., the life of citizen, is based on opinions which are essentially changeable. According to Arendt, “the opposite to truth was mere opinion, which was equated with illusion, and it was this degrading of opinion that gave the conflict its political poignancy” (Arendt 1954, 228).

¹ However, in this paper, I will not discuss the question whether truth is sufficient for reconciliation.

² In both cases which I refer here, the word “world” implicates people who live in the world.

In the modern age, the conflict between rational truth and politics disappeared. However, the conflict between truth and politics continues in another way, namely as the conflict between factual truth and politics. According to Arendt, “[w]hat is stake here [the conflict between factual truth and politics: T. H.] is this *common and factual reality itself*, and this is indeed a political problem of the first order” (Arendt 1954, 232; Emphasis is added by T. H.). Because “factual truth informs political thought just as rational truth informs philosophical speculation” (Arendt 1954, 234) and “facts and events [...] constitute the very texture of the political realm” (Arendt 1954, 227). Therefore, factual truth “is political in nature” (Arendt 1954, 234). “Facts and opinions, though they must be kept apart, are not antagonistic to each other; they belong to the same realm” (Arendt 1954, 234), namely political realm. However, factual truth is opposed to opinion in its “*mode of asserting validity*” (Arendt 1954, 235). Namely, truth is unconditionally valid in the sense that it does not require consent. Because factual truth is nothing but “truth” even though it concerns facts. Therefore, Arendt says: “Seen from the viewpoint of politics, truth has a despotic character” (Arendt 1954, 236). However, factual truth, as well as rational truth, is not transparent (Arendt 1954, 238). This is a weak point of factual truth. For this reason, factual truth is always threatened by danger that it becomes mere opinion. “In other words, factual truth is no more self-evident than opinion, and this may be among the reasons that opinion-holders find it relatively easy to discredit factual truth as just another opinion” (Arendt 1954, 239). “[T]o the extent that factual truth is exposed to the hostility of opinion-holders, it is at least as vulnerable as rational truth” (Arendt 1954, 239). Factual truth is very vulnerable. “[I]t concerns events and circumstances in which many are involved; it is established by witness and depends upon testimony” (Arendt 1954, 233f.). Therefore, factual truth is always threatened by political power. It is possible that factual truth is repainted by deliberate falsehood or plain lie.

The chances of factual truth surviving the onslaught of power are very slim indeed; it is always in danger of being maneuvered out of the world not only for a time but, potentially, forever. (Arendt 1954, 227)

However, here is the trouble for politics. When politics repaints factual truth at all with deliberate falsehood, the result is the self-destruction of politics. Because politics cannot “produce a substitute for secure stability of factual reality” (Arendt 1954, 254). Politics undermines its own foundation by deliberate falsehood or lie. “In other words, the result of a consistent and total substitution of lies for factual truth is [...] that *the sense by which we take our bearings in the world* – and the category of truth vs. falsehood is among the mental means to this end – *is being destroyed*” (Arendt 1954, 252f.; Emphasis is added by T. H.). Therefore, “a consistent and total substitution of lies for factual truth” is fundamentally impossible even though factual truth is very vulnerable. Arendt expresses it in the following manner: Truth “is ground on which we stand and the sky that stretches above us” (Arendt 1954, 259). This means: Factual truth is a limitation of politics in the sense that it is indispensable for politics.

2. Truth and Reconciliation

According to Arendt, factual truth is not identical with mere information, but it is *reality* itself. She says: “Reality is different from, and more than, the totality of facts and events” (Arendt 1954, 257). The term “reality” used here by Arendt can be expressed in another way, as “what happened.” That factual truth as reality is the limitation of politics means that we cannot change “what happened” or the factual truth. Therefore, in regard to factual truth or reality, we must reconcile ourselves to it even if the case is very hard for us: In other words, we must accept it (Arendt 2006, 5).

However, how can we do it? Arendt answers: By telling a story about it. Contingent events can gain their *meaning* through the story. Therefore, we can understand “what happened” through the story for the first time. Arendt refers to the words of Isak Dinesen, a storyteller who clearly expresses this thought: “It is perfectly true that ‘all sorrows can be borne if you put them into a story or tell a story about them,’ in the words of Isak Dinesen [...]” (Arendt 1954, 257). According to Arendt, history must be considered as the story in this sense.

Whenever an event occurs that is great enough to illuminate its own past, history comes into being. Only then does the chaotic maze of past happenings emerge as a story which can be told, because it has a beginning and an end. (Arendt 1994, 319)

Arendt finds the origin of history “in the moment when Ulysses, [...], listened to the story of his own deeds and sufferings, to the story of his life” (Arendt 1954, 45). Then, “[w]hat had been sheer occurrence became ‘history’” (Arendt 1954, 45). Contingent events become history when they are told as a story which enables us to understand them. Therefore, it is the political function of history as a story or telling “what happened” that reconciles us with reality: “The political function of the storyteller – historian or novelist – is to teach acceptance of things as they are. Out of this acceptance, which can be called truthfulness, arises the faculty of judgment. (Arendt 1954, 258)” In this point, Arendt takes over Hegel’s concepts of history and reconciliation.

To the extent that the teller of factual truth is also a storyteller, he brings about that “reconciliation with reality” which Hegel, the philosopher of history *per excellence*, understood as the ultimate goal of all philosophical thought, and which, indeed, has been the secret motor of all historiography that transcends mere learnedness. (Arendt 1954, 257)

It was Hegel who understood that function of history very well and placed it at the center of his own philosophy: Spirit reconciles itself to itself (in the form of reality) through history as its self-recognition process. According to Arendt, the last sentence in Hegel’s *Philosophy of History* suggests that his philosophy of history is based on the concept of reconciliation: “Only this insight can reconcile Spirit with the History of the World – viz.,

that what has happened [...] (Nur *die* Einsicht kann den Geist mit der Weltgeschichte und der Wirklichkeit versöhnen)” (Hegel 1884, 477 / HW 12, 540). Hegel’s philosophy of history which discusses “world history” is the last part of his philosophy of right. Hegel says in the preface of *Philosophy of Right* (1820), as well as in *Philosophy of History*, that the rational insight into reality enables us to reconcile ourselves to reality: “To recognize reason as rose in the cross of the present and thereby to enjoy the present, this is the rational insight which reconciles us to the actual (Die Vernunft als die Rose im Kreuze der Gegenwart zu erkennen und damit dieser sich zu erfreuen, diese vernünftige Einsicht ist die *Versöhnung* mit der Wirklichkeit)” (Hegel 1952, 12 / HW 7, 26f.).

We can reconcile ourselves to the world as reality through history as a story. Because it is through the story that we can understand the *meaning* of contingent events. Arendt says:

The task of the mind is to *understand what happened*, and this understanding, according to Hegel, is man’s way of reconciling himself with reality; its actual end is to be at peace with the world. (Arendt 1954, 7; Emphasis is added by T. H.)

However, Arendt does not entirely agree with Hegel³. She criticizes him for the lack of the Political, i.e., the *plurality* of human beings in his philosophy. According to her, we can find this absence of plurality of human beings in Hegel’s concept of reconciliation. Hegel understands history as the process of self-recognition of the Spirit. In Arendt’s view, Hegel understands spirit as one *singular* subject (Arendt 2006, 114f.). Therefore, the spirit reconciles itself only to itself, but not to others. Additionally, Arendt points out that Hegel could not avoid the “professional deformation (*déformation professionnelle*)” of historians because he was originally a historian (Arendt 2006, 529). According to Arendt, the historian finds “ends” everywhere. Hegel speaks of the end (goal) of history. However, “history is a story which has many beginnings but no end” in the sense that a new event always occurs, while a story which the historian tells us has a beginning and an end (Arendt 1994, 320). “For whatever the historian calls an end, the end of a period or tradition or a whole civilization, is a new beginning for those who are alive” (Arendt 1994, 320). History itself does not end as long as human beings exist. It is important for Arendt that an end, whatever it may be, is always at the same time a *beginning* which is nothing but the Political. When Arendt says that Hegel cannot avoid the “professional deformation” of historians, she criticizes the lack of the Political in Hegel’s philosophical thinking.

3. Reconciliation as Understanding

We can reconcile ourselves to reality – in other words: what happened or factual truth – through telling a story about it because it is through the story that we can understand the *meaning* of what happened. Therefore, Arendt says: “[R]econciliation is inherent in

³ In this paper, I will not discuss whether Arendt’s critique of Hegel’s philosophy is correct or not.

understanding” (Arendt 1994, 308; Emphasis is added by T. H.). Namely, understanding something means reconciling with it.

Here, I will briefly discuss some differences between reconciliation and forgiveness in Arendt’s thought. Reconciliation coincides with forgiveness in that both relate to “what happened.” In other words, reconciliation, as well as forgiveness, is related to the irreversibility of events or actions. Arendt recognizes that forgiving is a great capacity of the human being to begin something new: We could never act if we could never be forgiven. However, according to Arendt, reconciliation is different from forgiveness. In her essay “Understanding and Politics” (1954) which was originally called “The Difficulties of Understanding,” Arendt argues that understanding totalitarianism is not the same as condoning (forgiving) it (Arendt 1994, 308). While reconciliation is essentially connected to understanding, “forgiving has so little to do with understanding” (Arendt 1994, 308). Furthermore, forgiving “is a single action and culminates in a single act,” whereas understanding as reconciliation is “the specifically *human way of being alive*” (Arendt 1994, 308; Emphasis is added by T. H.). “It is an understanding activity by which, in constant change and variation, we come to the term with and reconcile ourselves to reality, that is try to be at home in the world” (Arendt 1994, 308). In her *Diary of Thoughts (Denktagebuch)* which was written from 1950 to 1953, too, Arendt mentions a difference between reconciliation and forgiveness: Forgiveness occurs only between heterogeneous people such as between parents and children, whereas reconciliation does not (Arendt 2006, 5). For this reason, forgiveness makes people unequal, whereas reconciliation creates solidarity among people (Arendt 2006, 8).

According to Arendt, “[t]he result of understanding is *meaning*, which we originate in the very process of living insofar as we try to reconcile ourselves to what we do and what we suffer” (Arendt 1994, 309; Emphasis is added by T. H.). Then, understanding which can produce meaning is brought about by the *imagination* (Einbildungskraft) which is distinguished from mere fantasy. Arendt says:

Without this kind of imagination, which actually is understanding, we would never be able to take our bearings in the world. It is the only inner compass we have. (Arendt 1994, 323)

The reason why imagination is called “inner compass we have” is that “imagination alone enables us to see things in their proper perspective” (Arendt 1994, 323). That means we cannot correctly judge without imagination. Imagination is nothing but the basis of judgment. Arendt finds this thought in the philosophy of Kant, especially his *Critique of Judgment*. As Arendt argues, imagination is, according to Kant, “the faculty of making present what is absent, the faculty of re-presentation” (Arendt 1992, 79). Namely, the imagination does not relate directly to the object, but only to its representation. What is important for judgment is the *distance* from the object, which puts people in the position of a *spectator* or *onlooker*. “[O]nly the spectator occupies a position that enables him to see the whole” because he/she is “impartial by definition” (Arendt 1992, 55).

[H]e [spectator; T. H.] could discover a meaning in the course taken by events, a meaning that the actors ignored; and the existential ground for his insight is his disinterestedness, his nonparticipation, his noninvolvement. (Arendt 1992, 54)

Arendt finds the position of spectator in Kant's ambivalent evaluation of the French Revolution. When Kant celebrates the French Revolution, he stands the point of spectator. Arendt says: "The importance of the occurrence (Begebenheit) is for him [Kant; T. H.] exclusively in the eye of the beholder, in the opinion of the onlookers who proclaim their attitude in public" (Arendt 1992, 46). "The onlooker's disinterested concern characterized the French Revolution as a great event" (Arendt 1992, 54). At the same time, Kant criticizes the Revolution from the position of actor. In contrast to the spectator, the actor is always partial because he/she is a "part of the play." It is not the actor but the spectator who can know the meaning of events, i.e., truth⁴. The actor cannot understand the meaning of events which he/she takes part in. Therefore, Arendt says that "withdraw from direct involvement to a standpoint outside the game is a condition *sine qua non* of all judgment" (Arendt 1992, 55).

However, this withdrawal into a position of spectator does not mean the withdrawal from the world as in the case of philosopher. This is an important difference between philosopher and spectator (therefore, between Hegel and Arendt). The spectator continues to stay in the world. Namely, the spectator stays with others. According to Arendt, only the spectator can tell a story about "what happened," which reconciles the listener including the spectator himself/herself with reality.

Conclusion

We elucidated the essential link between truth (reality or what happened) and reconciliation by analyzing the philosophy of Hannah Arendt. According to her, it is important for us to tell a story about what happened in order to reconcile ourselves to it. Because we can understand the meaning of contingent events only by telling a story (as history). This is a Hegelian inheritance in Arendt's philosophy. Additionally, the understanding of events is brought about by the imagination that is the basis of judgment which only the spectator can make. In this point, we can find a Kantian inheritance in Arendt's philosophy. In summary, *what is necessary for reconciliation is a truth in the sense of the meaning of events which only the spectator can understand.*

Finally, I will briefly consider a possible objection to this argument. Critics will object that there must be something which we cannot understand. Therefore, there must be something which we cannot reconcile ourselves to. What can we do in that case? I do not have any objection to the criticism. Because I think so, too. However, in principle, this objection is not so relevant to my argumentation in this paper. Because I think that this is not a question of right (quid juris) but a question of fact (quid facti). In fact, there are so

⁴ Arendt understands politics as theater. In this theater, spectator is prior to actor.

many things which we cannot understand. We must be able to keep a distance from an event in order to reconcile ourselves to it. In other words, we must be able to be spectators. However, this is very difficult especially when and because we are also actors (Nobody can stand only in the position of the spectator in this world). There may be what we cannot understand. However, we must make an effort to understand it. According to Arendt, “understanding begins with birth and ends with death” (Arendt 1994, 308). That is, difficulty of understanding is imposed on all of us as long as we live in this world.

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