

K. von Fritz
The Relevance of Ancient Social and Political
Philosophy for our Times



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A short Introduction to the Problem

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A few years ago a book was published by Hannah Arendt with the title 'between Past and Future'¹. Many critics, especially in the U.S.A., hailed this book—not quite without justification—as the most profound analysis of the specific ills and evils of our times that had been undertaken in recent years.

Right at the beginning of the introduction to this book² Hannah Arendt quotes two Frenchmen, one of the first half of the 19. century: Alexis de Tocqueville, the other of the first half of the current century: René Char. The former she quotes as saying that we are in great danger of losing our greatest treasure, liberty, the other as stating that we have already lost it. But both authors agree in stating that we are groping in the dark because, as Tocqueville has formulated it, "the past has ceased to throw its light on the present and the future", or, in the formulation of René Char "Our inheritance was left us by no testament".

With this Hannah Arendt agrees. But later on she says³ that she does "not intend to retie the broken thread of tradition or to invent some newfangled surrogates with which to fill the gap between the past and the future". "Throughout her book", she says³ "the problem of truth is kept in abeyance"; "the concern is only with how to move in this gap—the only region in which truth perhaps eventually will appear". "Her assumption", she says⁴, "is that thought itself arises out of incidents of living experience and must remain bound to them as the only guideposts by which to take its

¹ Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future, Exercises in Political Thought*, New York. 1961, 1969,

² Loc. Coll. p. 3 (René Char) and p. 7 (Tocqueville).

³ Ibidem p. 14.

⁴ Ibidem.

bearings". In another place she also speaks⁵ of the senselessness of "rehashing old verities which have lost all concrete relevance".

On the basis of these utterances it might appear that Hannah Arendt belonged to that large and vocal group of ultramoderns who not only, like Tocqueville and Char, regret that the tie of tradition is broken and that in consequence the past does no longer provide us with that safe and illuminating guidance that enlightened the progress of earlier generations from a familiar past into a yet untried, but not altogether dark future, but who are convinced that in our present situation the past has not to teach us anything anymore so that we have to make an entirely new start exclusively on the basis of our own experiences. Yet in the following chapters of her book Hannah Arendt continuously refers to the ancient Greeks (and to some extent the Romans) and in the second to last chapter of her book, in which she discusses the difference between what she calls rational and factual truth and the relation of these different kinds of truth to politics she comes to the conclusion⁶ that Greek philosophers and scientists have formulated "rational truths" that are, as she says, "not truth between men but truth above men", i.e. truths that are of everlasting validity and independent of historical situations, hence obviously not "verities which have lost all concrete relevance".

It would not make very much sense, pedantically to ventilate the question of whether Hannah Arendt in her second to last chapter contradicts what she has most emphatically stated in her first chapter or whether she is consistent, if not in words, at least in fact when simply trying to find her bearings by going back to an earlier tradition after having found that the ties of direct and continuous tradition had been unretrievably broken. Answering the question in the second sense one would at once find another apparent contradiction in the somewhat strange statement⁷ "Before the Romans such a thing as tradition was unknown; with them it became and

⁵ Ibidem p. 6.

⁶ Ibidem p. 247.

⁷ Ibidem p. 25.

after that it remained the guiding thread through the past and the chain to which each generation knowingly or unknowingly was bound in its understanding of the world and its own experience”.

That so eminent an author, who is so highly praised for her deep insight into the problems of the present by some of the most modern-minded critics, finds herself against her announced intentions almost irresistibly impelled to turn to Greek philosophers for enlightenment is certainly a strong indication of the relevance of ancient social and political philosophy for our times. Yet her own efforts of finding some guidance in the works of ancient Greek philosophy, quite understandably, have themselves something of the quality of groping in the dark which she in her quotations from Tocqueville and Char so vividly describes. This is also revealed by the fact, that sometimes, in drawing on ancient philosophers she arrives at very profound conclusions while at other times her interpretations both of actual political conditions in ancient Greece and of ancient political theories is rather superficial and not free from accepted clichés, and, above all, by the fact that some of the most essential ancient theories about man as a social animal are hardly mentioned, certainly not analysed.

In these circumstances it appears imperative to make an attempt to clarify the issue and to seek above all an answer to the following questions: 1. what is it that makes the ancient Greeks so important for an author passionately engaged in the search for a solution of the apparently new and unique problems of our times? and more specifically 2. what have the ancient Greeks in common with us so as to enable them to give us some guidance? and 3. in what respect did they differ from us, which is just as essential a condition for their usefulness? For if they were equal in every respect we would not have very much to learn from them.

In trying to find an answer to these questions it is perhaps expedient to start from Hannah Arendt's somewhat paradoxical statement that “before the Romans such a thing as tradition was unknown”, which appears to imply that the Greeks had no tradition. What can such a curious statement mean in view of the fact that