


The Tragic Limits of Compassionate Politics

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In “Totalized Compassion: The (Im)Possibilities for Acting out of Compassion in the Rhetoric of Hannah Arendt,” Matthew J. Newcomb calls for a semi-Arendtian “critical form of compassion” (107). This form of compassion, Newcomb argues, “can lead to imaginative connections between people when it is not a totalizing concept or sole basis for relationship” (107). This proposal is semi-Arendtian insofar as Newcomb acknowledges, and responds to, the discomfort many people feel about Hannah Arendt’s deep mistrust of (if not active hostility to) empathy.

As Newcomb says, this attitude toward empathy has long been something for which advocates of Arendt’s theories of public discourse have felt the need to apologize or explain. Newcomb argues, correctly I think, that Arendt mistrusts this emotion as a basis for political action on several grounds. First, the love that one feels for someone with whom one empathizes is a kind of self-love. One loves the other person because (and to the extent that) one could be that person. Insofar as this self-love collapses the space between people, it thereby prohibits genuine political action (as opposed to mere behavior, which is compelled). That is, because empathy makes us feel that we must help the
other(s), we have no choice but to try to help them. Finally, when we feel compassion, we do not necessarily seek justice through changing the political system that causes the injustice, but instead often look for methods of saving the individuals from the system. Rhetoric based in empathy seeks to change the audience's "responses from apathy to compassion," as Newcomb says (127); however, there is no guarantee that this newly felt compassion will result in political debate and institutional change.

Newcomb emphasizes the second and third points (the critique of empathy as totalizing), describing a class in which he strove to motivate students to consider tragic events not as mere opportunities to feel sorry for someone else's situation but to take the compassion to the political arena through an act of imagination "that feels alongside another, but never fully identifies with that other" (118). Because I think Newcomb's reading of Arendt is sensible, and his pedagogy admirable, I want to pursue the topic he discusses the least: the problem of empathy as self-love.

Like Newcomb, I often teach topics that invite students to consider tragic events (my class last semester concerned "ethnic cleansing" in Bosnia, Somalia, and Rwanda), and I do often "have a sense that the language of papers is just reproduced based on close affiliations the students have with particular groups or ideologies" (119). We tend to perceive (and discuss) these situations in what Perelman identified as a set of paired terms: innocent victim v. villain; sympathy v. outrage. Once we have determined any one of those referents, the rest fall into place: if I claim for myself the position of victim, then I am innocent, someone else is guilty, and you must feel sympathy for me and outrage toward them.

The degree to which we feel compassion and outrage depends, in large degree, on how much we identify with the victims. Identification, while it increases the likelihood of audience reaction, does so by collapsing the space between the victim and the audience. We feel compassion for them because we don't see them as them; we see them as us. Our compassion, therefore, is really for ourselves, with the consequence of a tragically limited politics. If we limit our political actions to those motivated by love, and we limit our love to those people who are like us,
then we will not act on behalf of people who are very different from us, let alone people who are not very loveable. One can see this problem especially clearly by considering the movement to abolish the death penalty. While these abolitionists have been relatively successful at fomenting outrage at demonstrably innocent people who have been (or are in danger of being) executed, especially people who are (or can be portrayed as) middle class, these abolitionists have had more difficulty leveraging that outrage into generalized anti-death penalty political action. Abolishing the death penalty requires getting people outraged about executing guilty people, not just innocent ones, and it requires outrage on behalf of people one would not want to meet in a dark alley. However, if the death penalty is wrong, then it is wrong for all people, regardless of how likable they are. The problem with the Innocence Project, as tremendously valuable as its work is, is that it leaves the logical premise of the death penalty (it’s okay to kill people for whom “normal people” feel no compassion) unchanged.

The grounding of political action in compassion confounds action until one can cast the roles; in regard to Rwanda, political action on behalf of the Tutsis was delayed because of initial reports of violence on the part of the Rwandan Patriotic Front, reports that were used to argue that the Hutus were not engaged in genocide, but in retaliatory military action. The Tutsis were not innocent, so this argument ran, and therefore were not victims deserving of compassion. When action was finally taken, and now that it is conventional for politicians to express remorse over the inaction, it has been on the basis that the Tutsis really were innocent victims (with visual rhetoric emphasizing women, children, or gender-neutral skulls). Pro-Hutu rhetors were able to delay action as long as they did by debating the applicability of the quality of “innocent” to the Tutsis; but why did that matter? What Tutsi behavior could possibly have justified the horrific genocide? Instead of arguing about who is the completely innocent victim for whom we should feel compassion and who is the entirely villainous evildoer about whom we should feel outrage, perhaps we should look for other bases for political discourse.

The problem of a politics of self-love came up with particular vehemence in the controversy surrounding the publication of Arendt’s
In that book, a report on the Israeli trial of Adolf Eichmann, a failed salesman who joined the SS (by mistake—he wanted to be one of the people riding around on the cars of high-ranking Nazi officials) and rose to be in charge of transporting Jews to concentration camps, Arendt remarked on Nazis’ dependence on Jews and the Jewish councils. She was (and, in many circles, still is) condemned for what is seen as a kind of "blaming the victim." Gershom Scholem, like others, accused Arendt of failure to practice "Ahavat Yisrael" (sometimes transliterated "ahavet Israel"). Her response was clear: her failure in that regard would not keep her up nights (see "'Eichmann in Jerusalem'"). Although the phrase is sometimes mildly translated as "support for the Jewish people," Arendt (and Scholem) clearly understood it as something much stronger—love for the Jewish people. Arendt pointed out that since she was Jewish, that was love for herself, an emotion of which she was deeply suspicious. The point of contention between her and Scholem, then, was whether one is obligated to love people like one’s self more than one loves people not like one’s self. Arendt assumed that one should not, while Scholem assumed one should.

Arendt also pointed out that Scholem’s argument demonstrated that he had not read the book (an accusation that turned out to be true); the political controversy arose out of a significant misrepresentation of Arendt’s text. The Israeli prosecutor, according to Arendt, kept using Holocaust victims’ testimony in order to make a point that Jews could and should have resisted, an argument that Arendt calls "silly and cruel" (Eichmann 283). However, Arendt is critical of the Jewish leadership, pointing out that the Nazis did receive “to an extraordinary degree” their cooperation: “To a Jew this role of the Jewish leaders in the destruction of their own people is undoubtedly the darkest chapter of the whole dark story” (117; emphasis added). What seems to have happened is that the distinction that Arendt makes between leaders and people was collapsed in the process of attributing to her the argument made by the prosecutor: that Jews should have resisted. Her point is simpler: the leaders shouldn’t have helped.

The argument that Arendt did make—that the Nazis relied heavily on the Jewish councils for the effectiveness of the Final Solution—was no different from the argument she made about the importance of public
cooperation in the Final Solution generally. Much of the book is a chapter-by-chapter description of how the Final Solution played out in various countries and regions. Throughout that narrative, Arendt emphasized that the Nazis were not the terrifying, efficient, and brutal storm troopers of Hollywood movies who forced their policies on an unwilling populace. They depended on the populace, and the populace usually responded helpfully. When they resisted, even in relatively mild forms (such as happened in Denmark), the famous Nazi efficiency staggered: “Their ‘toughness’ had melted like butter in the sun” (Eichmann 175).

Arendt may have underestimated the role that anti-Semitism played in the general public’s willingness to help (Daniel Jonah Goldhagen’s argument about the killing squads in Poland), but, certainly, others have come to similar conclusions: Nazism was terrifyingly efficient because non-Nazis cooperated. In other words, Arendt’s point about the Jewish councils is the same point she makes about other members of the public: the Final Solution relied on them. Fewer Jews would have been killed had the Jewish Councils not been so helpful because fewer Jews would have been killed had any of the helpful groups resisted; her argument did not hold the Jews any more responsible for their fate than it held the French, Poles, Czechs, or Germans. But neither did she hold them less responsible simply because she was a Jew; as a Jew, however, she did feel particularly failed by the Jewish leadership.

Thus, in addition to offending people who thought her personal identity should influence her judgment, Arendt was thereby understood to be arguing that the Jews were not really innocent, or were not really victims; however, such an understanding attempts to put back on to the narrative precisely the frame she was trying to avoid: who is the innocent victim for whom we should feel compassion?

That’s the wrong question because compassion doesn’t lead to action. She points out that Eichmann felt compassion for individual Jews, and she accepts his self-presentation of having been terribly moved by seeing a concentration camp. He was perfectly capable of feeling, but he wasn’t capable, she argues, of thinking. His feelings of compassion and horror came and went, and had no impact on his actions. By all accounts, many concentration guards were deeply moved by the plight of Jews, and felt compassion for them, a compassion that manifested itself in indi-
vidual acts of kindness. Arendt uses the mutual finger-pointing of Nuremberg to argue that the Nazis weren’t particularly tough: “Not a single one of them had the guts to defend the Nazi ideology” (Eichmann 175). And, certainly, the Jewish councils didn’t cooperate out of lack of compassion (she rejects the Freudian reading of a death wish), nor did the Danes resist because they felt more compassion, but out of principle (175). This is not a pleasant argument to make: we like to think that changing hearts changes behavior, and it may, but not necessarily in ways that change systems.

Up to, and through much of, the 1830s, major American abolitionists strove to end slavery through appealing to the compassion of slaveowners who, they hoped, would thereupon free their slaves. Slaveowners responded by insisting that they already felt a tremendous amount of compassion for their slaves, that slavery was a compassionate system of a loving patriarch whose behavior (including chastisement) was always motivated by love. They loved their slaves, they said, far more than factory owners loved their employees. Larry E. Tise’s Proslavery shows a pair of illustrations used to make this argument: an ill Northern laborer being carried in a stretcher to a poor house; an ill slave being attended by master and mistress. One of the frequently reprinted defenses of slavery was called, without any irony, A Treatise on the Patriarchal or Cooperative System of Society as It Exists in Some Governments, and many scholars agree that “patriarchal” is an accurate way to describe southern US slavery. Describing (and probably even genuinely perceiving) their relationship to their slaves in terms of familial affection did not prevent slaveowners from turning a tidy profit, breaking up slave families, or even whipping slaves, and, most important, it did not, as abolitionists hoped, inspire them to free all their slaves. As Jeffrey Young says, this is not to defend slaveowners: “If we conclude that growing numbers of southern masters loved their slaves, we mean it not as an apology for slavery but as an indictment of their notion of domesticity—a notion that equated love with control” (234). The kind of compassion that slaveowners felt for their slaves was what a superior feels for a submissive inferior; it maintains the hierarchy. Like Young, my point is not to defend slavery, but to use abolitionists’ rhetorical failure to point out that compassion does not necessarily result in political action. Compassion can be the
desire to save and succor the innocent weak, and, even when not grounded in the same kind of identification discussed previously, it still involves self-love: we love the role we are playing. Inferiors who invite our compassion do not necessarily call us to think critically about how we might be responsible for the situation; they invite us to think nobly of ourselves through saving them.

My point is that the best political practice for ending the injustice of slavery was not to get slaveowners to feel more: slaveowners who felt more for their slaves were not necessarily slaveowners who freed slaves. They certainly were not necessarily people who engaged in political action to end the institution of slavery. Similarly, the solution to the Nazi genocide was not to try to get Nazis to feel more compassion. They were quite good at it, in fact. It may be counter-intuitive, but Nazi rhetoric was a rhetoric of compassion, and was thoroughly grounded in a narrative of innocent victims and outrageous villains. Hitler, after all, justified his annexation of the Sudetenland and invasions of both Czechoslovakia and Poland on the grounds of compassion for the oppressed Aryans within those borders. George Orwell accurately described Hitler’s method of self-presentation: “He is the martyr, the victim, Prometheus chained to the rock, the self-sacrificing hero who fights single-handed against impossible odds. If he were killing a mouse he would know how to make it seem like a dragon” (Essays 251). Arendt, in Eichmann, notes Himmler’s brilliant strategy of making concentration guards feel sorry for themselves: “So that instead of saying: What horrible things I did to people!, the murderers would be able to say, What horrible things I had to watch in the pursuance of my duties, how heavily the task weighed upon my shoulders!” (106). So compassion is not necessarily a political virtue: it depends upon for whom one feels compassion, and what one is inspired to do by it.

While I agree with much of this mistrust of compassion, like Newcomb, I can’t help but think that Arendt’s “definition of compassion is too either/or” (108). Here, again, the abolitionists are a useful example. While they did not persuade large numbers of slaveowners to free their slaves, they did inspire powerful political action. From resistance to the gag rule to fighting the extension of slavery, abolitionists’ appeal to compassion led to engaged political action. Their rhetoric of compassion was most
effective with Northerners who did not feel implicated in slavery itself, so, as Frederick Douglass pointed out, Northern abolitionism was perfectly compatible with Northern racism. Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* is famous for its ability to inspire compassion for slaves (especially the Christ-like, not “Uncle Tom”-like, Uncle Tom); however, the long sections of it in which Stowe condemns Northern racism were generally expurgated in pirated edition, and the highly resistant Uncle Tom was quickly transmogrified into a less threatening image from minstrel shows. In short, the compassion that abolitionists effectively unleashed was a major factor in the Civil War, and therefore in the ending of slavery; however, it was less effective in inspiring self-reflection among Northerners, whose racist treatment of African Americans was left unchanged. It is not, therefore, that compassion is useless, but that, as Newcomb argues, it is of limited effect unless it is critical, especially self-critical.

Arendt’s willingness to be self-critical—to be critical of her own people—was part of what offended people about *Eichmann*; however, one of the puzzles of the response was why that book and that controversy. She did not, as has sometimes been said, express any compassion for Eichmann; she condemned his actions and endorsed the death penalty for him. But neither did she express compassion for his victims, or for Israel’s difficult situation in which it was placed due to the failure of action on the part of the United States (the CIA had long known where Eichmann was, and had suppressed the information to curry favor with Germany) and Argentina (which was actively protecting Nazis). That failure to pay attention to how she might make her readers feel was, some scholars have suggested, the reason the reaction to *Eichmann in Jerusalem* was so venomous. Amos Elon has said, “At times her style was brash and insolent, the tone professorial and imperious. She took a certain pleasure in paradox, and her sarcasm and irony seemed out of place in a discussion of the Holocaust” (99). (Elisabeth Young-Bruhl makes a similar point in her biography of Arendt.) Elon says it was her tone that meant her book generated a larger controversy than was created by books that were much more critical of the Jewish leadership than Arendt had been. If so, then it means that Arendt would have done well to have paid more attention to the feelings of her readers, to express more compassion. Thus, perhaps
compassion not only has more political power than Arendt credits, perhaps its rhetorical importance should not be underestimated.

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Works Cited


