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The Tragic Bind of the Political: An Analysis of Hannah Arendt and James Baldwin's Disagreement

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ABSTRACT

Hannah Arendt and James Baldwin fundamentally, and famously, disagreed on the idea of allowing love to be a guiding principle in the political sphere. Baldwin believed that to "end the racial nightmare, and achieve our country," we must come together politically "like lovers." Contrastingly, Arendt believed that political equality and action are only possible if we set boundaries between the political and social spheres, keeping out the polluting effects of any discriminatory prejudices that govern social relations – and, consequently, keeping out love. This essay will explore the metaphysical infection in Baldwin's notion of love but concentrate on what is of value in his thinking for an examination of Arendt's conception of the political sphere. The discussion of love opens into a response to the wider question of how the political sphere might be constructed with a sufficient amount of stability and yet at the same time remain open to change. For Arendt, the ever-present possibility of change is predicated on the "human condition of natality" which serves as an undercurrent to our potential for political action and freedom. Baldwin, similarly concerned with freedom for political change, uses a Christian notion of salvation to ground his faith that politics might expand to include even the most disenfranchised members of the polis.

KEYWORDS

Arendt, Baldwin, Kant, Love, Politics, Salvation, Metaphysics, Natality

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Anyone who cannot form a community with others, or who does not need to because he is self-sufficient, is no part of a city-state — he is either a beast or a god. Hence, though an impulse towards this sort of community exists by nature in everyone, whoever first establishes one was responsible for the greatest of goods. For as a human being is the best of animals when perfected, so when separated from LAW and JUSTICE he is worst of all. —Aristotle, *Politics I*, Chapter 2.

One age cannot bind itself, and thus conspire, to place a succeeding one in a condition whereby it would be impossible for the later age to expand its knowledge (particularly where it is so very important), to rid itself of errors, and generally to increase enlightenment. That would be a crime against human nature, whose essential destiny lies precisely in such progress; subsequent generations are thus completely justified in dismissing such agreements as unauthorized and criminal. —Immanuel Kant, "An Answer to the Question 'What Is Enlightenment?'"

Suppose we take Aristotle's assertion that humans are 'the most perfected' when guided by laws and participating in a political system; we must next ask: On what foundations should politics be built? Philosophically, questions about how politics should be conducted are questions about how it is we should live together; on what basis should we build our relationships with those we *have* to interact with because of living in a shared place, shared country? How can we have an organizational structure that allows for collaboration rather than the use of violence, force, or subjugation? Political theorist, Hannah Arendt, constructed a model of politics that we are still contending with intellectually today, despite how unattainable it seems with the modern 'rise of the social sphere' and intrusion of economics into all areas of life. Arendt believed in the separation of the political realm from that of the social and the private in order to preserve the privacy of family relations and individual choices and protect the political realm as a space of speech and action in which hierarchy and force have no dominion. For Arendt, political action is only possible if we set boundaries between the political and social spheres, keeping out the polluting effects of the discriminatory prejudices

that govern social relations. James Baldwin alternatively proposed that we should ground political relations on love. This, as will be shown, is because Baldwin operated with a Christian notion of salvation. In this essay, I will explore how Baldwin's faith in a politics of love raises important questions for Arendt's notion of the political but how, ultimately, love and politics are incompatible due to the necessity of distinction within political relationships. This distinction, according to Arendt, accommodates human plurality and maintains the freedom on which political action is predicated. Baldwin's contribution to Arendt's project has to do with what I see as their shared interest in the status of natality and how the political must accommodate the ever-present possibility of newness. Written into our democratic principles must be an acceptance of progress and thus, tragically, stable political foundations must endure the instability of remaining ever open to change.

James Baldwin and Hannah Arendt's differing opinions on the modus operandi of the political realm were made clear in a letter exchange in 1962. Arendt wrote an open response to Baldwin's *Letter from a Region of My Mind*, published earlier that year, stating: "What frightened me in your essay was the gospel of love which you begin to preach at the end. In politics, love is a stranger, and when it intrudes upon it nothing is being achieved except hypocrisy" (Arendt 2006). Arendt is concerned by the intrusion of love in politics because her political theory seeks to establish the most stable foundations for the political and she saw the "passion" of love to be antithetical to this project (Arendt 2018, 242). Love, as a force, brings us closer by closing the gap between people. In Arendt's words, love "destroys the in-between which relates us to and separates us from others" (Arendt 2018, 242). This "in-between" or "worldliness" is essential for Arendt's conception of the political because the maintenance of the in-between is what preserves the human condition of plurality and allows for relationships of equality. Scholar Sean Butorac wrote of Arendt's theories, "The trouble with neighbourly love is that it absolves humans of the characteristics that make distinction possible, while the intrusion of intimate love into the public realm prevents us from maintaining equality" (Butorac 2018, 711). Politics should be defined by the separation and collectivization of equal individuals and so Arendt sought a political realm based on equal exchange and an economy of transaction. She would, therefore, keep love out because equality relies on plurality as opposed to the inevitable union or oneness created by love. In *The Human Condition*, Arendt wrote, "Love, by

its very nature, is unworldly, and it is for this reason rather than its rarity that it is not only apolitical but antipolitical, perhaps the most powerful of all antipolitical forces" (Arendt 2018, 242). Love is antipolitical because it does away with difference; it brings us together too closely for freedom. "Hatred and love belong together, and they are both destructive; you can afford them only in the private and, as a people, only so long as you are not free" (Arendt 2006). Love annuls the possibility of equal exchange and, to use Butorac's words, "eviscerates the very possibility of politics" (Butorac 2018, 711).

Contrastingly, James Baldwin believed in the utter conflation of love and political relationships. In his biography of Baldwin, James Campbell wrote, "Many writers have defended the notion that love can be brought to bear upon the solution of political problems, but no one believed it more passionately than James Baldwin" (Campbell, 2021). Baldwin proposed that we conduct our political relationships through the prism of love and that we behave politically "like lovers". His concluding remarks in *Letter from a Region of My Mind*, which Arendt so disagreed with, included the following proclamation: "If we—and now I mean the relatively conscious whites and the relatively conscious blacks, who must, like lovers, insist on, or create, the consciousness of the others—do not falter in our duty now, we may be able, handful that we are, to end the racial nightmare, and achieve our country, and change the history of the world" (Baldwin 1962, 30). The strength of Baldwin's commitment to the idea of love in politics is so great that he believed it to be the only thing that could deliver America from the "racial nightmare" that it was and is living through. Baldwin's notion of love is undoubtedly deeply influenced by his exposure to the Christian gospel of love and yet he developed faith in love's power, ironically, by first distancing himself from the Church. *Letter from a Region of My Mind*, begins with a story of Baldwin running from adolescent fears of crime and destitution and into the perceived salvation of the Church. At a relatively young age he became a minister like his father and dedicated himself to writing sermons and preaching. However, he grew sick of the hypocrisy of Church leaders who lined their pockets with funds taken from parishioners on the brink of destitution. The young Baldwin found the purported Christian love to be corrupted by greed and cruelty and reduced to a mere manipulation technique. He consequently declared that anyone wishing to be "a truly moral human being" should "first divorce himself from all the prohibitions, crimes, and hypocrisies of the Christian church" (Baldwin 1962, 11).

The “love” Baldwin found in the Church was insincere however Baldwin seems only to have become more fervent about the power of true, sincere love. He believed love to be our saving grace and that if we wish to “change the history of the world” then people must approach each other politically with love.

It seems that Arendt and Baldwin agree that love has an inherently boundary-destroying nature, but they disagree as to the political merit of this quality. For Arendt, the closeness created by love threatens plurality which she saw as the condition that “both relates and distinguishes us” (Butorac 2018, 711) in a way necessary for political action. Consequently, “For Arendt, who regards plurality as the condition of action, and therefore the precondition of freedom” (Butorac 2018, 711), love cannot be given power in any political sphere seeking to preserve freedom. Whereas, for Baldwin, the closeness created by love, makes space for a radical inclusivity that assuages his fear of the potentially violent effects of any exclusionary boundaries, even those that are there to preserve equality within the political realm. Baldwin’s commitment to the idea of the necessity of love in politics seems to be because he was operating under a Christian notion of salvation. Later, this essay will further examine the relationships of Baldwin’s elusive “love” to the Christian metaphysic but for now - some background. A belief in the power of salvation grounded Baldwin’s interest in how love could (re) integrate those who are outcasts of the political sphere; those who might appear to be shut out by Arendt’s political boundaries. In an interview given in 1973 for *The Black Scholar*, in answer to a question about what message he would like to leave for those “engaged in active struggle”, Baldwin said the following: “I think the revolution begins first of all in the most private chamber of somebody’s heart, in your consciousness” (Baldwin 1973, 42). He then goes on to explain how inclusion in politics should, through the medium of love, be made open to all. He wrote, “[The vanguard of a revolution which is now global begins with the black family.] My brother in jail, my sister on the street and my uncle the junkie, but it’s my brother and my sister and my uncle. So it’s not a question of denying them, it’s a question of saving them” (Baldwin 1973, 42). We see from this quote that to love is to make familial and that the closeness formed is what saves people and brings them into politics, i.e., makes them visible in the political sphere and so worthy of political consideration. The “vanguard of a revolution” (the leaders of his political vision) is “my brother and my sister and my uncle”, in a literal and figurative sense, regardless of their circumstances. For Baldwin, unlike Arendt, the

political must transcend transactional relationships and his way of accomplishing this is by making love, as something that is a gift with no need for reciprocity, the governing principle. Baldwin's belief in 'saving people' by loving them without expecting anything in return, transcends transactional relationships.

As we have seen, Arendt's concern that politics operate within an economy of exchange and so be bounded by transactional, as opposed to loving, relationships is contrary to Baldwin's desire to both transcend transactional relationships and overcome any boundaries that lead to exclusion. Baldwin's belief in salvation and the indiscriminate nature of his (Christian) love suggests that he would take issue with Arendt's argument that to come together as political equals, the political realm must be preserved by the use of delimiting boundaries. For Arendt, preserving these boundaries is what allows for freedom; however, Baldwin's beliefs compel us to ask, what of those kept out by such boundaries, what of the outcasts? Does Arendt's political sphere exclude the prisoner and the person suffering from addiction because they do not have a chance to enter the realm of speech and action and put their rationality to work? Under Baldwin's conception of the political, the prisoner and the person suffering from addiction can be a part of the political because they can be loved. But is this conception of the political merely an eroded and weakened version of Arendt's aspirations? Doesn't a lack of limits degrade freedom and, as Arendt argued happens when love is involved, make equal relationships, and thus true collaboration and political action, an impossibility? To respond to these questions and assess the viability of political love as a means to transcend the transactional and establish a radically inclusive political economy, we must first scrutinize the philosophical ground of Baldwin's faith in love because, although Baldwin distanced himself from the Church, his notion of salvation nevertheless seems to be predicated on metaphysical grounds. Baldwin's idea of the saving gift of love seems to be that of the unconditional love of God explicated in John 3:16 in the Bible. This love is wholly outside of an economy of exchange: "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son" - the *gift* of His son, of course, has no need of, and in fact does not allow for reciprocity. Rather, this biblical love is for the sake of salvation: "For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him" (John 3:16). For Arendt, what renders one a political entity is their participation in an economy of equal exchange. However, the love of God that so inspired Baldwin is one in which God's unconditional giving annuls

the possibility of reciprocity and equality; what equality could there possibly be between an omnipotent, omnipresent, and omniscient God and His perpetually imperfect creations? Therefore, to seriously entertain Baldwin's integration of the gift-giving economy of love into the political, we must forgo equality - something most would find utterly unacceptable and that would undermine Arendt's entire project (hence her alarm at the suggestion).

It may be that Baldwin's language of love is too compromised by metaphysical Christian ideals to be seriously considered as a foundation for a political organizational structure that must withstand affronts without deference to metaphysics. However, the intention behind his appeal to love, his desire to overcome the transactional and erode the delimiting boundaries of politics so that everyone might be included, is where I suggest the value of his disagreement with Arendt can be found. Baldwin's interest in transcending the transactional and allowing for spontaneous gifts (albeit the gift of love) reveals an acknowledgment of the necessity of newness in politics, something Arendt also valued because of her belief that the political realm makes space for free action and, consequently, for change. Arendt described action as "the only activity that goes on directly between men without the intermediary of thing or matter" (Arendt 2018, 7). It was the closeness implied by this direct relation of 'man to man' without the need for an exchange of items that I think Baldwin was interested in with his valorization of love as a political medium that escapes transaction. However, for Arendt, action requires separation because it "corresponds to the human condition of plurality, to the fact that men, not Man, live on the earth and inhabit the world" (Arendt 2018, 7). In Baldwin's desire to do away with distinction he reveals himself to be concerned with Man, not men. For the sake of freedom, Arendt could never allow such an ideal of oneness into her idea of politics because she believed maintaining the human condition of plurality (paying attention to relations of men, not Man) to be essential for maintaining free political discourse. Despite these differences, Baldwin seems to have grasped the importance of open possibility, the possibility of action and newness, that is so central to Arendt's philosophy. Arendt believed that there is always the potential for newness and change because of the "human condition of natality" (Arendt 2018, 9). Linking natality and political action, Arendt wrote, "the new beginning inherent in birth can make itself felt in the world only because the newcomer possesses the capacity of beginning something anew, that is, of acting" (Arendt 2018, 9). The democratic process must be a space

of possibility in which political action is made possible by an awareness and accommodation of the fact of natality. In the potential for novelty encapsulated by every political act, the political sphere affirms itself as open-ended. The Arendtian political sphere must foster action and “since action is the political activity par excellence, natality, and not morality, may be the central category of political, as distinguished from metaphysical, thought” (Arendt 2018, 9). Baldwin’s concern with morality implicates him in metaphysical thought and would exclude his ideas from Arendt’s conception of the political. However, his emphasis on love as that which allows us to welcome *everyone* into the political, i.e., to act based on *open* possibility, reveals a tension in Arendt’s thinking and perhaps in the very foundational principles of democracy.

Even Kant, heralded as the great categorical thinker, emphasized the importance of an openness to change in the political, necessitated by the inherent impossibility of static conditions. As we have explored, it seems to be that Baldwin’s appeal to metaphysical foundations and an unchanging love is hankering after this impossible stasis. Nonetheless, Kant posited that any social agreement which seeks complete stability is in fact “unauthorized and criminal” and, therefore, “subsequent generations are thus completely justified in dismissing such agreements” (Kant 1784). He writes, “Such a contract, whose intention is to preclude forever all further enlightenment of the human race, is absolutely null and void” (Kant 1784). The potential precarity of Arendt’s categorical thinking (and only categories founded outside of metaphysics allow for such an admission of precarity) is what accounts for the human condition of natality and thus makes space for freedom and consequently for action. So, there is a double bind in which the separation of Arendt’s categories is necessary for preserving the distinctions of plurality within the political realm which is in turn necessary for establishing the freedom to act politically, and yet the very possibility of action and freedom necessitates that there must be an openness and an admission that any (democratic) system must include the potential to be overridden. As Kant highlighted: no society can immutably *bind* itself to any form of “guardianship over each of its members” (Kant 1784). Political action, only made possible by the democratic idea of equality and freedom, is of a tragic nature. Kant shows us that the members of a polis can impose no principle of governance on themselves save a “provisional order for a specific, short time” (Kant 1784). “The criterion of everything that can be agreed upon as law by a people” is that there must be the

possibility of change. To allow for action, law (and so politics) must account for the human condition of natality and, consequently, categories must be in some way open – an apparent paradox.

The tragedy is that we must make promises in order to “form a community with others” (Aristotle 2013), and yet, as Kant demonstrated, no promise can be absolutely binding. Aristotle claimed that “a human being is the best of animals when perfected” (Aristotle 2013), that is to say when a part of the polis and participating in law and justice. Nevertheless, the possibility of action, of change, necessitated by living in the temporal world without metaphysical stability, undermines the supposed certainty of any promise that attempts to predict and stabilize the future. No contract can be immutable because the temporal world is in a constant state of flux. Similarly to Kant, Arendt was concerned with the problem of promise-making in her political philosophy. For Arendt, “the price we pay for plurality” is “the impossibility of remaining unique masters of what we do” (Arendt 2018, 244). In other words, we cannot project mastery into an inherently uncertain future; we cannot guarantee that anything remains and continues to remain. Promises made in the political sphere are intended to “at least partially” expel the unpredictability of the “basic unreliability of men who never can guarantee today who they will be tomorrow, and out of the impossibility of foretelling the consequences of an act within a community of equals where everybody has the same capacity to act” (Arendt 2018, 244). The necessity of a freedom that allows each of us to act politically (referring here to the Arendtian notion of action) cannot be coupled with any indubitable promise regarding the future, even, and this is perhaps tragic, the promise that this state of freedom continues to be preserved. The tragic bind of the political is something that democratic theorists must contend with as they question the legitimacy of a democratic public’s right to decide to consensually end democracy. Arendt wrote, “Man’s inability to rely upon himself, or have complete faith in himself (which is the same thing) is the price human beings pay for freedom” (Arendt 2018, 244). This inability to rely on himself and consequent inability to make any binding promise is a result of the same freedom that the (Arendtian) political sphere is designed to preserve. Despite the inability to do so irrevocably, political organization is established as a means of, in some way, (attempting) to bind men to law and justice because to accomplish anything political, we need some semblance of stability despite the impossibility of attaining it absolutely. Our need to work for

this impossible stability is why Aristotle claimed that “whoever first establishes [the city-state] was responsible for the greatest of goods” (Aristotle, 2013).

We began by exploring Arendt and Baldwin’s disagreement over the merit or necessity of allowing love to govern political relationships. Arendt believed the inclusion of love to be unviable because love facilitates a closeness between people that eliminates the very possibility of politics because, for Arendt, distinction and separation are needed in the political sphere in order for us to establish equality and freedom. In opposition to Arendt, Baldwin seems to believe we cannot operate under the Arendtian separation of political and private spheres because political action begins in the most intimate and private of places, in the heart and in the family. However, his argument for love as an instrument of politics is weakened by its reliance on a metaphysical foundation. Despite the untenability of a metaphysically grounded political theory, Baldwin’s philosophy of love raises important questions for those of us unpacking Arendt’s thinking, specifically in relation to questions of inclusivity. Moreover, Baldwin’s desire to establish love as a gift that should be given to all seems to reveal an interest in the need for openness in the political sphere, an interest Arendt explored through the lens of the human condition of natality and the consequential, ever-present, possibility of newness. Kant, in his essay “An Answer to the Question ‘What Is Enlightenment?’”, was similarly concerned with the need to be open to change, and, despite his renowned categorization way of thinking, he declared that it would be a crime to seek to establish a principle that might remain unchangeable for future generations. No principle can be wholly stable and yet, responding to the potentially tragic nature of democracy, Arendt lays out principles of political governance that allow for the freedom that undermines absolute stability but is necessary for democratic politics to account for natality and be open to progress.

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