Hannah Arendt’s Shared Destiny with Rahel Varnhagen

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"All my life I considered myself Rahel and nothing else." 1

---Hannah Arendt

Hannah Arendt was one of the most formidable philosophers and political commentators of the twentieth century. She left behind an enormous corpus of books that cover the range of topics of ontology, epistemology, political theory, linguistic analysis and historiography. She ignited debates that still rage on the Holocaust, civil rights, the ideal human life and the future of humankind. She was a Jew by birth and a Zionist by vocation, yet her writings transcend both characterizations. Arendt never renounced her Judaism, although she was entirely secular and distanced herself from her origins, not in rejection, but in an attempt to become an authentic actor/intellectual in the modern world. In an exchange of letters with her dissertation adviser, Karl Jaspers, Arendt explained:

She was not trying to reify the “fate of Jews” by rooting Rahel in determinism of social condition and inheritance. Her work, instead, was a “preliminary” effort to indicate that a “certain possibility” which she “tentatively” called “fatefulness,” emerges in the process of conscious distancing from Jewish identity in order to recapture it more fully. It is the historical givenness of the Jewish people, which can be objectified so that it can be understood and reappropriated. This fatefulness . . . can occur only in a separation from Judaism.... An objectification is in fact there in a certain sense, but not an objectification of Jewish experience ... but of the historical conditions of life.... 2

Rahel Varnhagen, in contrast, was a relatively minor figure during the brief emergence of the bourgeois salons that were the intellectual frosting on the cake of early nineteenth-century Berlin. If Arendt had not published a biography of her, Varnhagen might have been relegated to the proverbial dustbin of history. Arendt describes Rahel in the introduction to Rahel’s biography as “not beautiful” without intellectual talents and a rather typical romantic. (Arendt 1974, xviii) Rahel, to be fair, did have her brief share of the historical spotlight and her ability to recover from near abject poverty to one who literally rubbed shoulders with some of the greatest minds of her time should not be belittled. However, Rahel herself left little behind in the way of intellectual inheritance aside from a collection of letters. The letters themselves are a fascinating window into the intellectual and social life of the German elite in nineteenth-century Berlin, although they betray a rather narcissistic personality. Rahel herself comes across as a lightweight intellectual ‘groupie’ who, without Arendt, would have had little impact on the intellectual history of her period. A few snippets show both her shallowness and her affinity with some issues of self esteem that Arendt, as opposed to Rahel, sought to overcome:

Everything is topsy-turvy; no Jew stays put; but, alas I alone wretchedly stay where I am.
–Reaction to a letter from Count Karl von Finckenstein, winter of 1795 (Arendt 1974, 26)
I cannot be blindly captivated by any person, so that I don’t go in for worship...because otherwise I would certainly have fallen in love with Goethe, and you know I only worship him. --Letter to Marcus Veit circa 1799 (Arendt 1974, 35)

I was a Jew, not pretty, ignorant, with grace, sans talents et sans instruccion, ah ma soeur, s’est fini: c’est fin avant la fin reelle. I could not have done anything differently. --written in Rahel’s old age (Arendt 1974, 224)

For Arendt, who overcame great obstacles and tragic love affairs, these lines must have been seen as banal indeed. Nonetheless, Arendt wrote to one of her best friends and sympathizers over the end of her affair with Martin Heidegger, just as Arendt was finishing her biography of Rahel:

[She was] my closest friend, though she had been dead over one hundred years. (Young-Bruehl 1982, 26) 3

Rahel's life

Rahel was the first child of a successful Orthodox Jewish merchant, Marcus Levin, in Berlin on May 19, 1771. She and her three younger brothers and a younger sister were all raised Orthodox and relatively unschooled in German culture. Rahel's early letters were written in Yiddish in Hebrew script. Rahel's home was a congenial atmosphere for meeting many of the German intelligentsia.

She was very intimate with Dorothea and Henriette, daughters of Moses Mendelssohn. Together with them she knew Henriette Herz, with whom she later became most intimately associated, moving in the same intellectual sphere. Rahel's home became the meeting-place of men like Schlegel, Schelling, Steffens, Schack, Schleiermacher, Alexander and Wilhelm von Humboldt, Lamotte-Fouqué, Baron Bruckmann, Ludwig Tieck, Jean Paul Richter, and F. von Gentz. During a visit to Carlsbad in 1795 she was introduced to Goethe, whom she again saw in 1815, at Frankfort-on-the-Main. (The Jewish Encyclopedia 1906, 42)

Rahel became estranged from her family after her father's death when the male siblings took control of the family fortune and basically abandoned their sisters and mother to poverty. (Arendt: 1974, 3-16) She found herself consigned to an attic room in Berlin on Jaegerstrasse, a garret, where she met with her "friends." This became her first salon. In addition to many of the 'friends' noted above, she also developed a torrid and personally tragic love affair with Count Karl von Finckenstein, which raised the dilemma of her Jewish past to new heights, since the Count could not marry a Jewish woman.

Finally, she developed a love affair with Karl Von Varnhagen which spanned over a decade. Rahel converted to Christianity in 1814 and married Karl. She followed Von Varhagen around Germany where he assumed several posts as a career civil servant. In 1819 he was posted to Berlin and Rahel established a salon there from 1821 to 1832. "Among the guests are Bettina von Arnim, Heinrich Heine, Prince Pueckler-Muskau, G.W.F. Hegel, Ranke, and Eduard Gans. Rahel died on March 7, 1833." (Benhabib 1975, 9)
Arendt's account of Rahel's life is self-characterized as being a tale of "relentless abstractness" due to Arendt's "unusual" methodological angle:

It was never my intention to write a book about Rahel; about her personality, which might lend itself to various interpretations according to the psychological standards and categories that the author introduces from outside; nor about her position in Romanticism and the effect of the Goethe cult in Berlin, of which she was actually the originator; nor about the significance of her salon for the social history of the period; nor about her ideas and her "Weltanschauung," insofar as these can be reconstructed from her letters. (Arendt 1974, xv)

Arendt Addresses Rachel

One curiosity of Arendt's approach to Rahel's life arguably stems from her own self-consciousness as a Jew and her belief that in the twentieth century to be Jewish had become unavoidably a "political stance:"

The present biography was written with an awareness of the doom of German Judaism (although, naturally without any premonition of how far the physical annihilation of the Jewish people in Europe would be carried); but at that time, shortly before Hitler's coming to power, I did not have the perspective from which to view the phenomenon as a whole. . . . On the other hand, it must not be forgotten that the subject matter is altogether historical, and that nowadays not only the history of the German Jews, but also their specific complex of problems, are a matter of the past. (Arendt 1974, xvii)

In characterizing Arendt's Jewish writings, Jerome Kohn noted how important, if not central was Arendt's, Jewishness. It is part of Arendt's ontological Gestalt, sometimes in the foreground and sometimes in the background. But it is always 'there: '

But what of her Jewishness? It is that which chiefly concerns us here. We have seen that Arendt considered her Jewishness, the way she appeared to others, a "given" of her being which she never wanted "to change or disclaim"; and also that she was called upon to a form of anti-Semitism that she was a Jew. Perhaps defending herself as a Jew may be seen as an act inspired by "gratitude" for the very gift that others denigrated, or, perverted, or attempted to rob her of altogether. Be that as it may neither gift nor gratitude made her Jewishness "articulate" or called it "into full existence," in anything like the sense that her womanhood was articulated in the experience of love... (Kohn and Feldman 2007, xiii)

Arendt Grapples with Rahel

What was the fascination that caused Arendt to bother to compose a biography of Rahel and to take over ten years to bring it to publication? Why did she pick Rahel and not the much more influential, and just as conflicted, Dorothea von Schlegel (née Brendel Mendelssohn), the daughter of Moses Mendelssohn?
Arendt’s early writings suggest that she herself was struggling with the same existential issues as Rahel. It is relatively easy to argue that this was just an issue of both their youthful periods of intellectual and emotional development. It is likely that Arendt never fully escaped dealing with these issues throughout her life, although a full demonstration would be beyond the scope of this exercise. For this reason, this essay will focus on the lessons Arendt drew from Rahel’s experiences and will only briefly show how Rahel’s shadow can be seen in some of Arendt’s most brilliant works, such as *The Human Condition* (1958).

**Arendt Wrestles with Rahel**

Arendt began her book on Varnhagen in 1929 and finished it in 1938. It is much more than a simple biography and is presented in a radically different format than most straightforward biographies. In the introduction Arendt tells us that she intends to draw a portrait that “follows as closely as possible the course of Rahel’s reflections upon herself.” (Arendt 1974, xvi) Arendt stated that to do otherwise would be viewed as a failure. If so, Arendt failed, despite her intentions. The entire biography of Rahel approximates a mirror of Arendt’s own struggle with her Jewish past and her own attempts to transcend them. When Arendt deals with broader issues beyond the role of two Jewish women dealing with assimilation, her biography becomes a historical commentary on the failure of Enlightenment emancipation for German Jewry and the world historical disaster that loomed for German and to some extent modern Jewry, outside Israel. The biography is fundamentally a introverted, psychological and philosophical working out of "feeling alien, different, and other; the consciousness of oneself as a "pariah," as an outcast who does not fit in, as they are present in Varnhagen's as well as Hannah Arendt's own life..." 5

There is a distinct interplay, a silent dialogue, between Rahel and Arendt. The biography of Rahel becomes an autobiography of Arendt's own philosophical and political transformation in the Germany during the period immediately preceding the Holocaust.

There is thus a mirror effect in the narrative. The one narrated about becomes the mirror in which the narrator also portrays herself."6 Arendt noted this:

> Pariahs accept that unfortunate given of their lives, rather than denying it, retreating from it, trying to hide who they are. One does not have the capacity to become just anything one pleases: "The recovering of a new personality is as difficult-and as hopeless-as a new creation of the world. Whatever we do, whatever we pretend to be, we reveal nothing but our insane desire to be changed, not to be Jews. (Ring 1991, 443)

Arendt's began her work on Varnhagen in 1929, after she completed her 7 doctoral dissertation on Augustine at Heidelberg under Karl Jaspers' tutelage. This *Habilitationsschrift* was necessary in order to gain the right to teach in a German university. The biography, which could be seen as an exercise in refreshing Arendt from the intensity of her dissertation, was essentially finished in 1933 except for the last two chapters, which were finished during her exile in France in 1938. It is interesting that Jaspers was "irritated" by Arendt's deviation from serious existentialism at the time.
You objectify "Jewish Existence" existentially--and in doing so perhaps cut existential thinking off at the roots. The concept of being-thrown-back-on-oneself can no longer be taken altogether seriously since it is grounded in terms of the fate of the Jews instead of being rooted in itself. ... The passage from the letters, which you have chosen so well, suggests something quite different to me: "Jewishness" is a ...a manifestation of a selfhood originally negative in its outlook and not comprehensible from the historical situation. It is a fate that did not experience liberation from the enchanted castle.

The Varnhagen biography appeared first in English translation in 1957 with the subtitle "The Life of a Jewish woman.” Interestingly, when the first German edition came out in 1959, Arendt subtitled it in German: "Lebensgeschichte einer deutschen Juedin aus der Romantik," "the life history of a German Jewess from the Romantic period."

Arendt as a Philosopher

In *The Human Condition*, perhaps the most important of Arendt's historical and political writings, the Jewish question is not raised at all, with one significant exception.

During her discussion of the "Vita Activa and the Modern Age" Arendt raises the question of truth. For Arendt, escaping the domestic shadows and acting on the political stage was humankind's *telos*, her ultimate state of being. Yet modernity, beginning with Descartes, had reduced truth to a simple artifact of human intersubjective sensibility. This stands in stark contrast to the Judaeo-Christian concept of revelation. A fairly long quote from her opus contains the single shadow of Jewishness in her philosophical lament for a lost world:

[Cartesian] doubt doubts that such a thing as truth exists at all, and discovers thereby that the traditional concept of truth, whether based on sense perception or on reason or on belief in divine revelation, had rested on the twofold assumption that what truly is will appear of its own accord and that human capabilities are adequate to receive it. That truth reveals itself was the common creed of pagan and Hebrew antiquity, of Christian and secular philosophy. (Arendt 1958, 251)

Arendt's frustration with the loss of the ability "to know," reduces her to the romantic condition of Rahel. One is the child of one's circumstances no matter how towering one's intellect. Arendt herself made this point in *Eichmann in Jerusalem*. What constituted reality for Eichmann was as much a product of his particular circumstance as what constituted—a very different----reality for the Jewish victims. That is what Arendt meant by the banality of evil, a very misunderstood point. Arendt, herself, however, overcame and stood outside her circumstances. She in fact called for the creation of a Jewish Army to join in the fight against the Nazis. Arendt undoubtedly realized both at the time and that, as an historical pariah, she had as little chance as Rahel would to change the course of world events. However, only the Pariah, akin to the Greek hero, had any chance of overcoming her circumstance. To be extraordinary meant to escape 'fate.' That is one reason the pariah Jew has been so universally despised. The Jew is the perennial and proverbial outsider. Jew of necessity must be 'become' because as a Pariah the existence itself relies on escaping or exploiting 'given' circumstance and overcoming or changing them. The alternative for the Jew is destruction, either religiously, politically, socially, economically, or in the extreme,
but real, case wholesale annihilation. This makes for the possibility for universal admiration or universal deprecation, both at the same time.

The modern rejection of objective truth as a standard, an archaic Jewish notion, leaves humankind at the mercy of political society's definition of truth. Arendt mourns at length for the political stage in which the person of action, almost always a man, creates truth by means of articulate and persuasive speech. Alas, Arendt tells us, the demands for equality, civil, and economic rights, have crushed the particular individual, turning him into an anomic character or a Pariah. Although Arendt does not state it in *The Human Condition* as starkly as she does in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* or *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, this was the historic function of the Jew in Christian society and for women, almost universally.

Had Hannah Arendt not personally drawn the connection between herself and Rahel Varnhagen, analyzing such a connection might not be considered a serious intellectual endeavor. Arendt virtually makes this point in a speech she made upon receiving the Lessing Peace Prize in 1959 in Hamburg Germany:

> Rahel and her contemporaries failed to create a world, except in that brief intermezzo between 1790 and 1806 when a few exceptional Prussian Jews could emerge into the world of genteel society, only to be pushed back into obscurity with the onslaught of anti-Semitism in Prussia after the victory of Napoleon. The fragility and almost illusory character of the world of the "salons" that Jewesses like Rahel Varnhagen and Henriette Herz created for a brief moment stands in sharp contrast to the fate of the "stateless" and "worldless" people that the Jews would become in the twentieth century.  

What must have haunted Arendt, given her own calamities in Weimar Germany, was that despite her personal successes, her literally rubbing shoulders with some of the greatest intellectuals of her time, Arendt too failed to create anything more than an illusory world. Weimar was also a ‘brief intermezzo.’ Arendt’s own Zionist writings were a riposte to Rahel’s detached assimilationist Romanticism. Arendt mirrored Rahel’s experience, but not at all exactly. Arendt was an actor, not a parvenu. Arendt recognized that being a Pariah could be a virtue and not just a consequence. Jewishness for Arendt was a private matter created by historical accident. But that accident, that contingency, gives hope that one can overcome the loss of the public realm through commitment to objective truth in the face of social convention. As she stated in *The Human Condition*:

> But society equalizes under all circumstances, and the victory of equality in the modern world is only the political and legal recognition of the fact that society has conquered the public realm, and that distinction and difference have become private matters of the individual. (Arendt 1958, 41)
Bibliography

Major Works by Hannah Arendt:


Works Cited:


Notes:

1 Seyla Benhabib, 11.

2 Joanna Scott Vecchiarelli, 34.
Astonishingly, this quotation is drawn from *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 59.

The imbedded quotes are draw from Arendt's doctoral dissertation on Augustine

Benhabib, op cit. 22.

Ibid, 11.

Jennifer Ring, 443.

Benhabib, 10

Op.cit, (g. 13)