

SUICIDE FOR POLITICAL ENDS: WHEN KILLING ONESELF BECOMES A FORM OF ACTION

Adam Dunn*

Abstract

I mean to look at the boundary Arendt creates around the political realm with the use of a peculiar example. This will be the suicide of Hirade Kiyohide, retainer to the Japanese lord Oda Nobunaga, as a method of protest. His death was accompanied by a letter, detailing his dissatisfaction with the young Nobunaga's conduct. Hirade's suicide seems to fit Arendt's concept of action well, although it actually deviates from it in several respects. He put biological necessity to one side for the sake of a public realm and set of principles, something emphasized in Arendt's discussions of political freedom. In the way he put aside necessity, he referenced it in a particular way which brought it out 'into the open' of the public as most kinds of action do not. I will contend that this does not disqualify his suicide as an example of action, as some of Arendt's own examples involve necessity in a similar way, particularly Achilles. I will also use this example to look at the relationship between action and principles, as Arendt uses these terms. Hirade's protest was regarding Oda's failure to conform to his role within the feudal system. It was thus an example of action inspired by a principle of government, along similar lines to the use Arendt makes of the term 'principle'. In spite of the conceptual blurs found in such a case, Arendt's distinction between labour, work and action is still valuable. Both Hirade's method (suicide as protest) and aim (reinforcement of feudal norms) are borderline cases of what Arendt would admit into public/political. This border element is what makes the case worth examining.

Keywords: Hannah Arendt, Hirade KiYohide, suicide, action, political freedom.

Introduction

Hirade Kiyohide was a retainer to Oda Nobunaga, a Japanese feudal lord, during the latter's youth (6, p. 68). Oda refused, upon inheritance, to take his new duties seriously, something which Hirade repeatedly attempted to rectify (6, p. 305). Hirade's concerns are directly related to a common, if not properly public, realm. He could be seen as essentially trying to prevent Oda remaining irresponsible, childlike. We may also talk about him acting under the guidance of a principle, in either Arendt's or Montesquieu's sense.

* Adam Dunn – Ph. D. student University of Southampton, UK; agd1983@googlemail.co.uk.

Initially, I want to discuss Hirade's final attempt to persuade Oda to take up his feudal duties, which took place in 1553. This attempt consisted of Hirade putting his feelings into letter form and then killing himself in a ritualised manner, a practice of protest known as *kanshi* (6, p. 305), which was rare but not unprecedented.

Method

In relating what could plausibly be an Arendtian approach to *kanshi*, we can briefly touch on a few of her comments regarding suicide 'in general'. She seems at one point to approve of the notion that «suicide is a noble gesture to escape a life that has become burdensome» in opposition to claims made for the sanctity of bare life as such (2, p. 315). In that sort of case, we may still talk about an actor's conscious shaping of their story, as Achilles' own death in battle worked to preserve the integrity of his life's story (2, cf. p. 193–194). However this does not appear to be the relationship between necessity and one's persona which is established in any cases of public suicide, like Hirade's. In the case of suicides for a public, biological necessity appears with the agent in public, perhaps tainting the common discourse. One can distinguish between coercive and non-coercive uses of one's mortality in public discourse very easily. For coercive purposes, one must associate a particular claim or desire with the declared aim of not living in the event of non-fulfilment. For this to work, of course one's life (or the consequences of its ceasing) must matter to another more than costs associated with compliance. In this sort of case, it's easy to see that politics is corrupted by an attempted subversion of the other's capacity for free action. Hirade differs in that his death and his statement of intent occurred simultaneously, without threat established as link between the two. Instead, we should note that Hirade gained no coercive influence as a result of his suicide, rather suffering the same broad unpredictability of consequences as we find in Arendt's description of public acts (2, p. 191–192).

We might note a certain pathos, or desperation, in the last act of a desperate retainer, tinged with the feeling of having failed in his earlier attempts to persuade Oda to mend his ways. If Oda had continued to shirk his duties, to live like an unruly child, Hirade would have presumably been lost to history. In this way, we can see a link to the account Arendt gives of courage as pre-requisite for participation in the public realm (1, p. 448). This particular description of courage focuses on the disdain with which one must treat physical comforts and safeties, in order to give up the merely animal life of labour and consumption for public engagement (1, p. 448). This is merely a particularly severe form of this gamble, in which the stake is definitely lost, whether or not one gains any content for one's persona. There's only time to note in passing that the solitary nature of this act puts it at odds with Arendt's later focus, in *Civil Disobedience*, on intersubjective consensus-building.

Topic

We turn now to what I'd tentatively call the 'content' of Hirade's actions. This could again be sub-divided further. On the one hand, we have to look at the match between principles and actions, with relation to the actor, to Hirade-as-revealed-through-doing. On the other hand we have the constitution of this action as conducted for the benefit of a particular other, rather than a public 'in general'.

For Another

We may note briefly Arendt's description of the hostile relationship between biological necessity and individuality. While Hirade's individuated story isn't affected by this, it might yet be effaced by the very specificity of its aims. The concern here relates to the structural relationship of care between the two men and mirrors Heidegger's description of solicitous Dasein 'stepping into' the place of the other (3, cf. p. 158). This could be the case here, although, of the two, it seems Hirade is the more likely to be effaced. This is because his acts all point towards Oda in a way that, on the surface, leaves no trace of his own self. Another concerned retainer might just as well have stepped into the same role, or so it seems. However, if we allow this in this case, it becomes difficult to find cases of action where a similar claim could not be made. Instead, it seems to me that Hirade's suicide remains action because it points beyond the singularity of Oda by pointing beyond to a principle. Almost by definition, anything related to claims of what is properly adult must reach to both sides of public and private, as it is an attempt to 'call out' to someone who remains in the latter. Part of this calling out must involve claiming (at least implicitly) what sorts of qualities differ between these two ways of being. In doing so, it must reach beyond the public, perhaps even in discussion of what may take place in one to best prepare for the other. We might, justifiably, argue that the system Hirade was recommending was unable to offer a full experience of public glory, that he was really advocating the exchange of one kind of impoverished life for another. Against this, it might be said that even advocacy of non-political ways of life constitute action. This seems to be a good description in Hirade's case and, if we are to make anything of this claim, we must consider this in terms of 'principles'.

Principles and Actors

Principles are not often discussed in literature about Arendt and her own description of them occurs in two-thirds of a page in *What is Freedom?* She attributes the inspiration for this to Montesquieu's description of principles as «that which sets [governments] in motion» (4, p. 21) and gives them a similar role in relation to the acting individual (1, p. 445). Arendt also links principles to freedom, claiming their enactment and freedom are coexistent. In fact, she talks about freedom manifesting only during the 'performing act' related to the principle 1, p. 445).

When Arendt contrasts principles to motives, it is on the grounds that principles lack the level of precision necessary to prescribe particular acts, somehow reaching beyond the narrow particularity of the given situation (1, p. 445). There is, however, the question of how exactly one gets from the abstract principle down to the particular. This is clearly a matter of judgment, understood in almost any sense, more specifically a matter of exegesis. I think we can find a certain freedom in this exegetical work, a freedom which hovers ambiguously between an Arendtian public freedom and a freedom of the will.

The way in which this applies to Hirade should be fairly obvious, although it is by no means clear that this sort of structure is apparent in all instances of action. An actor need not, it seems to me, always knowingly address a principle when he acts. The matching of principle to act could therefore be, occasionally, something for the story-teller to sort out after.

In Hirade's case, I don't believe this sort of 'reading in' of a principle is necessary. Indeed, we can find here two seemingly distinct principles at work and this does raise the question of whether a single action can call on more than one principle. On the one hand, there is the possibility of describing Hirade's prescription for Oda in terms of a principle of government. On the other, there is Hirade's own relation to his duty as retainer.

This relationship to duty was explicitly recognised as a principle in its own right, bushido, roughly analogous to European ideas of chivalry (6, cf. p. 298 ff). We might also accept it as a motivating principle for the Japanese government of the time, as Montesquieu took honour to be the principle for monarchies (4, Book 3, Chapter 6). The two are rather similar, so we cannot accept only one but not the other to Montesquieu's usage. Bushido was also the subject of several books, written both by and for those attempting to follow it. Most famously, this includes Hagakure, with its detailed instructions regarding appearance and manners, extolling sincerity and providing by instruction what Hirade provided by example. Writing Hagakure (5) involves the same exegetical approach, more obviously perhaps that in the case of the actor, since the exegesis alone is what becomes displayed in public. As for the principle Hirade pointed towards for Oda, this is a little harder to pin down exactly. It seems to me that was appealing to a fairly common set of values, particularly sincerity, seriousness and taking up one's responsibilities in the right spirit. While I said above that Hirade was appealing for Oda to step into a public persona, I did not at that point link to an idea of generality. I believe that we could do so more easily now, if we accept that Hirade was recommending that the common realm (and people in it) ought to relate a certain way. We might also think that the call was for Oda to play his part in a principle, and a world, held in common.

References

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