

The Human Condition

BY HANNAH ARENDT

Second Edition

with a New Foreword by
Danielle Allen

Introduction by
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Introduction

Margaret Canovan

With the creation of man, the principle of beginning came into the world. . . . It is in the nature of beginning that something new is started which cannot be expected. (Below, p. 177)

I

Hannah Arendt is preeminently the theorist of beginnings. All her books are tales of the unexpected (whether concerned with the novel horrors of totalitarianism or the new dawn of revolution), and reflections on the human capacity to start something new pervade her thinking. When she published *The Human Condition* in 1958, she herself sent something unexpected out into the world, and forty years later the book's originality is as striking as ever. Belonging to no genre, it has had no successful imitators, and its style and manner remain highly idiosyncratic. Although Arendt never tried to gather disciples and found a school of thought, she has been a great educator, opening her readers' eyes to new ways of looking at the world and at human affairs. Often the way she sheds light into neglected corners of experience is by making new distinctions, many of them threefold, as if conventional dichotomies were too constricting for her intellectual imagination. *The Human Condition* is crammed with distinctions: between labor, work, and action; between power, violence, and strength; between the earth and the world; between property and wealth; and many more, often established through etymological explorations. But these distinctions are linked to a more controversial way of challenging contemporary truisms. For (in what is surely the most unexpected feature of the book) she finds in ancient Greece an Archimedean point from which to cast a critical

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eye on ways of thinking and behaving that we take for granted. Indeed, her calm assumption that we may be able to learn important lessons from the experience of people who lived two and a half millennia ago itself challenges the modern belief in progress. Continual references to the Greeks have added to the sense of bewilderment experienced by many readers of *The Human Condition*, who have found it hard to understand what is actually going on in the book. Here is a long, complex piece of writing that conforms to no established pattern, crammed with unexpected insights but lacking a clearly apparent argumentative structure. The most urgent question to be addressed by way of introduction is, therefore, what is Arendt actually *doing*?

Both the book's difficulty and its enduring fascination arise from the fact that she is doing a great many things at once. There are more intertwined strands of thought than can possibly be followed at first reading, and even repeated readings are liable to bring surprises. But one thing she is clearly *not* doing is writing political philosophy as conventionally understood: that is to say, offering political prescriptions backed up by philosophical arguments. Readers accustomed to that genre have tried to find something like it in *The Human Condition*, usually by stressing Arendt's account of the human capacity for action. Since the book is laced with criticism of modern society, it is tempting to suppose that she intended to present a utopia of political action, a kind of New Athens. Nor is this caricature entirely without foundation. Arendt was certainly drawn to participatory democracy, and was an enthusiastic observer of outbreaks of civic activity ranging from American demonstrations against the Vietnam War to the formation of grassroots citizens' "councils" during the short-lived Hungarian Revolution of 1956. Reminding us that the capacity to act is present even in unlikely circumstances was certainly one of her purposes. But she emphatically denied that her role as a political thinker was to propose a blueprint for the future or to tell anyone what to do. Repudiating the title of "political philosopher," she argued that the mistake made by all political philosophers since Plato has been to ignore the fundamental condition of politics: that it goes on among *plural* human

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beings, each of whom can act and start something new. The results that emerge from such interaction are contingent and unpredictable, “matters of practical politics, subject to the agreement of many; they can never lie in theoretical considerations or the opinion of one person” (p. 5).

Not political philosophy, then; and, indeed, a good deal of the book does not on the face of it appear to be about politics at all. The long analyses of labor and work, and of the implications of modern science and economic growth, are concerned with the setting for politics rather than politics itself. Even the discussion of action is only partially related to specifically political acts. Shortly after the book’s publication, Arendt herself described *The Human Condition* as “a kind of prolegomena” to a more systematic work of political theory which she planned (but never completed). Since “the central political activity is action,” she explained, it had been necessary first to carry out a preliminary exercise in clarification “to separate action conceptually from other human activities with which it is usually confounded, such as labor and work.”¹ And indeed the book’s most obvious organizing principle lies in its phenomenological analysis of three forms of activity that are fundamental to the human condition: labor, which corresponds to the biological life of man as an animal; work, which corresponds to the artificial world of objects that human beings build upon the earth; and action, which corresponds to our plurality as distinct individuals. Arendt argues that these distinctions (and the hierarchy of activities implicit in them) have been ignored within an intellectual tradition shaped by philosophical and religious priorities. However, there is considerably more to the book than the phenomenological analysis, and more even than Arendt’s critique of traditional political philosophy’s misrepresentation of human activity. For those concerns are framed by her response to contemporary events. When she says in her prologue that she proposes “nothing more than

1. From a research proposal submitted to the Rockefeller Foundation after the publication of *The Human Condition*, probably in 1959. Correspondence with the Rockefeller Foundation, Library of Congress MSS Box 20, p. 013872.

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to think what we are doing,” she also makes clear that what she has in mind is not just a general analysis of human activity, but “a reconsideration of the human condition from the vantage point of our newest experiences and our most recent fears.” *What experiences and fears?*

II

The prologue opens with reflections on one of those events that reveal the human capacity for making new beginnings: the launch of the first space satellite in 1957, which Arendt describes as an “event, second in importance to no other, not even to the splitting of the atom.” Like the Hungarian Revolution of 1956, which also occurred while she was working on the book, this unexpected event led her to rearrange her ideas, but was at the same time a vindication of observations already made. For, noting that this amazing demonstration of human power was greeted on all sides not with pride or awe but rather as a sign that mankind might escape from the earth, she comments that this “rebellion against human existence as it has been given” had been under way for some time. By escaping from the earth into the skies, and through enterprises such as nuclear technology, human beings are successfully challenging natural limits, posing political questions made vastly more difficult by the inaccessibility of modern science to public discussion.

Arendt’s prologue moves from this theme to “another no less threatening event” that seems at first sight strangely unconnected: the advent of automation. While liberating us from the burden of hard labor, automation is causing unemployment in a “society of laborers” where all occupations are conceived of as ways of making a living. Over the course of the book, framing the phenomenological analysis of human activities, a dialectical contrast between these two apparently unrelated topics is gradually developed. On the one hand, the dawn of the space age demonstrates that human beings literally transcend nature. As a result of modern science’s “alienation from the *earth*,” the human capacity to start new things calls all natural limits into question,

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leaving the future alarmingly open. On the other hand, in a development Arendt traces to “alienation from the *world*,” modern, automated societies engrossed by ever more efficient production and consumption encourage us to behave and think of ourselves simply as an animal species governed by natural laws.

Human animals unconscious of their capacities and responsibilities are not well fitted to take charge of earth-threatening powers. This conjunction echoes Arendt’s earlier analysis of totalitarianism as a nihilistic process propelled by a paradoxical combination of convictions: on the one hand the belief that “everything is possible,” and on the other that human beings are merely an animal species governed by laws of nature or history, in the service of which individuals are entirely dispensable. The echo is not surprising, for *The Human Condition* is organically linked to Arendt’s work on totalitarianism, and the two together contain an original and striking diagnosis of the contemporary human predicament.

The book grew from the Charles R. Walgreen Foundation lectures which Arendt gave at the University of Chicago in April 1956, themselves an outgrowth of a much larger project on “Totalitarian Elements in Marxism.” Arendt had embarked on this project after finishing *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, which contained a good deal about the antecedents of Nazi anti-Semitism and racism, but nothing about the Marxist background to Stalin’s murderous version of class struggle. Her new enterprise was to consider what features of Marxist theory might have contributed to this disaster. In the event, her trawl brought up so rich and variegated a catch that the Marx book was never written, but many of the trains of thought involved found their way into *The Human Condition*, notably her conclusion that Marx had fatally misconceived political action in terms of a mixture of the other human activities she calls *work* and *labor*.

To understand political action as *making* something is in Arendt’s view a dangerous mistake. Making—the activity she calls *work*—is something a craftsman does by forcing raw material to conform to his model. The raw material has no say in the process, and neither do human beings cast as raw material for an

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attempt to create a new society or make history.² Talk of “Man” making his own history is misleading, for (as Arendt continually reminds us) there is no such person: “men, not Man, live on the earth and inhabit the world.” To conceive of politics as making is to ignore human plurality in theory and to coerce individuals in practice. Nonetheless, Arendt found that Marx had inherited this particular misconception of politics from the great tradition of Western political thought. Ever since Plato turned his back on the Athenian democracy and set out his scheme for an ideal city, political philosophers had been writing about politics in a way that systematically ignored the most salient political features of human beings—that they are plural, that each of them is capable of new perspectives and new actions, and that they will not fit a tidy, predictable model unless these political capacities are crushed. One of Arendt’s main purposes in *The Human Condition* is therefore to challenge the entire tradition of political philosophy by recovering and bringing to light these neglected human capacities.

But this critique of political philosophy is not the only grand theme in the book that stems from her reflections on Marx. For although Marx spoke of *making*, using the terminology of craftsmanship, Arendt claims that he actually understood history in terms of processes of production and consumption much closer to animal life—labor, in fact. His vision of human history as a predictable process is a story not of unique, mortal individuals but of the collective life-process of a species. While he was in Arendt’s view quite wrong to suppose that this process could lead through revolution to “the realm of freedom,” she was struck by his picture of individuality submerged in the collective life of a human species, devoted to production and consumption and moving inexorably on its way. She found this a revealing representation of modern society, in which economic concerns have come to dominate both politics and human self-consciousness.

2. Arendt’s point is illustrated by Mussolini’s admiring comment on the Bolshevik revolution, “Lenin is an artist who has worked in men as others have worked in marble or metal,” quoted by Alan Bullock in *Hitler and Stalin: Parallel Lives* (London: Fontana Press, 1993), page 374.

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A second grand theme interwoven with Arendt's phenomenology of human activities is therefore her account of the rise of a "laborers' society."

This theme of "the social" remains one of the most baffling and contentious aspects of the book. Many readers have taken offense at Arendt's derogatory references to social concerns, and have also assumed that in criticizing the conformist materialism of modern society, Arendt intends to recommend a life of heroic action. But that reading misses the book's complexity, for another of its central themes concerns the *dangers* of action, which sets off new processes beyond the actors' control, including the very processes that have given rise to modern society. At the heart of her analysis of the human condition is the vital importance for civilized existence of a durable human world, built upon the earth to shield us against natural processes and provide a stable setting for our mortal lives. Like a table around which people are gathered, that world "relates and separates men at the same time" (p. 52). Only the experience of sharing a common human world with others who look at it from different perspectives can enable us to see reality in the round and to develop a shared common sense. Without it, we are each driven back on our own subjective experience, in which only our feelings, wants, and desires have reality.

The main threat to the human world has for several centuries been the economic modernization that (as Marx pointed out) destroyed all stability and set everything in motion. Unlike Marx, for whom this change was part of an inevitable historical process, Arendt traces it to the unintended effects of contingent human actions, notably the massive expropriation of ecclesiastical and peasant property carried out in the course of the Reformation. For property (in the sense of rights to land passed down through the generations) had always been the chief bastion of the civilized world, giving owners an interest in maintaining its stability. The great change set in motion by the expropriations of the sixteenth century was twofold. For one thing, peasants with a stake in the stability of the world were turned into day laborers entirely absorbed in the struggle to satisfy their bodily needs. For another, stable property was converted into fluid wealth—capital, in

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fact—with the dynamic effects that Marx had described so well. Instead of inhabiting a stable world of objects made to last, human beings found themselves sucked into an accelerating process of production and consumption.

By the time that Arendt was reflecting on the implications of automation, this process of production and consumption had gone far beyond catering for natural needs; indeed the activities, methods, and consumer goods involved were all highly artificial. But she points out that this modern artificiality is quite unlike the stable worldly artifice inhabited by earlier civilizations. Objects, furniture, houses themselves have become items of consumption, while automatic production processes have taken on a quasi-natural rhythm to which human beings have had to adjust themselves. It is, she says, “as though we had forced open the distinguishing boundaries which protected the world, the human artifice, from nature, the biological process which goes on in its very midst as well as the natural cyclical processes which surround it, delivering and abandoning to them the always threatened stability of a human world” (p. 126). Elsewhere in *The Human Condition* she describes what has happened as an “unnatural growth of the natural” or a “liberation of the life process,” for modernization has turned out to be extraordinarily good at increasing production, consumption, and procreation, giving rise to a vastly expanded human race which is producing and consuming more than ever before. Her contention is that since these economic concerns came to be the center of public attention and public policy (instead of being hidden away in the privacy of the household as in all previous civilizations), the costs have been devastation of the world and an ever-increasing tendency for human beings to conceive of themselves in terms of their desire to consume.

The implication of her argument is not, however, that all we need to do is to haul ourselves up out of our immersion in labor and take action. For this modern hegemony of laboring does not mean that human beings have ceased to act, to make new beginnings, or to start new processes—only that science and technology have become the arena for “action into nature.” At the very same time when men were becoming more and more inclined to

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think of themselves as an animal species, their ability to transcend such limits was being dramatically revealed by scientific inventions. For the counterpart of the “world-alienation” suffered by laborers was “earth-alienation” among scientists. While Archimedes had declared long ago that he would be able to move the earth if he could find a place to stand, Arendt argues that (from the time of Galileo to contemporary space engineers and nuclear scientists) men *have* found ways of looking at the earth from a cosmic perspective, and (exercising the human privilege of making new beginnings) have challenged natural limits to the point of threatening the future of life itself. According to her diagnosis of the contemporary predicament, Promethean powers—releasing processes with unfathomable consequences—are being exercised in a society of beings too absorbed in consumption to take any responsibility for the human world or to understand their political capacities. She observes in her prologue that “thoughtlessness” (itself related to the loss of the common human world) is “among the outstanding characteristics of our time,” and her object in thinking aloud was surely to encourage thought in others.

III

In so far as Arendt’s purpose was to provoke thought and discussion, she has been resoundingly successful. Like many of her writings, *The Human Condition* has been the subject of intense debate ever since its appearance. Indeed, few other works of modern political theory have had such a mixed press, regarded by some as a work of genius and by others as beneath refutation. Many academics have taken exception to the book’s unorthodox style and manner. Paying no attention to mainstream debates, Arendt sets out her own analysis without defining her terms or engaging in conventional argumentation. Political controversies have also raged about the book. Its treatment of the *animal laborans* and its analysis of social concerns made its author unpopular with many on the left, but her account of action brought a message of hope and encouragement to other radicals, including some in the Civil Rights movement and behind the Iron Curtain.

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During the students' movement of the 1960s *The Human Condition* was hailed as a textbook of participatory democracy, and association with that movement in turn alienated its critics.

In recent years, as Arendt's thought has attracted increased attention (partly for reasons she would not herself have welcomed, such as interest in her gender, her ethnicity, and her romantic relationship with Heidegger), the book's importance has come to be very widely recognized, but its meaning remains in dispute. Such is the complexity of its interwoven threads that there is scope for many different readings. Aristotelians, phenomenologists, Habermasians, postmodernists, feminists, and many others have found inspiration in different strands of its rich fabric, and the forty years since its publication are not nearly long enough to allow an assessment of its lasting significance. If we can extract a central theme from so complex a book, that theme must be its reminder of the vital importance of politics, and of properly understanding our political capacities and the dangers and opportunities they offer.

Arendt's account of the human condition reminds us that human beings are creatures who *act* in the sense of starting things and setting off trains of events. This is something we go on doing whether we understand the implications or not, with the result that both the human world and the earth itself have been devastated by our self-inflicted catastrophes. Looking at what she calls "the modern age" (from the seventeenth to the early twentieth century), she diagnoses a paradoxical situation in which radical economic processes were set off by human action, while those concerned increasingly thought of themselves as helpless flotsam on the currents of socioeconomic forces. Both trends, she believed, were linked with a new focusing of public attention on economic activities that had traditionally been private matters for the household. In her prologue, however, she observes that this "modern age" of which she writes has itself now passed away, for the advent of nuclear technology has begun a "new and yet unknown age" in the long interaction between human beings and their natural habitat. If she were alive today, she might point to a novel variation on the familiar theme of power and helplessness, again connected with the emergence into the public

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realm of a natural function hitherto cloaked in privacy. On the one hand, the advent of genetic engineering (with its power to set off new processes that burst the bonds of nature) strikingly confirms human transcendence and what she called “a rebellion against human existence as it has been given” (p. 2). On the other hand, our self-understanding as animals has deepened into an unprecedented stress not just on production but on reproduction. Matters of sex, allowed only recently into the public arena, seem rapidly to be elbowing other topics out of public discourse, while neo-Darwinian scientists encourage us to believe that everything about us is determined by our genes.

Since the gap between power and responsibility seems wider than ever, her reminder of the human capacity for action and her attempt “to think what we are doing” are particularly timely. However, we need to listen carefully to what she is saying, for we can easily misunderstand her message as a call for humanity to rise from its torpor, take charge of events, and consciously make our own future. The trouble with that quasi-Marxist scenario is that there is no “humanity” that *could* take responsibility in this way. Human beings are plural and mortal, and it is these features of the human condition that give politics both its miraculous openness and its desperate contingency.

The most heartening message of *The Human Condition* is its reminder of human natality and the miracle of beginning. In sharp contrast to Heidegger’s stress on our mortality, Arendt argues that faith and hope in human affairs come from the fact that new people are continually coming into the world, each of them unique, each capable of new initiatives that may interrupt or divert the chains of events set in motion by previous actions. She speaks of action as “the one miracle-working faculty of man” (p. 246), pointing out that in human affairs it is actually quite reasonable to expect the unexpected, and that new beginnings cannot be ruled out even when society seems locked in stagnation or set on an inexorable course. Since the book’s publication, her observations on the unpredictability of politics have been strikingly confirmed, not least by the collapse of communism. The revolutions of 1989 were notably Arendtian, illustrating her account of how power can spring up as if from nowhere when

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people begin to “act in concert,” and can ebb away unexpectedly from apparently powerful regimes.

But if her analysis of action is a message of hope in dark times, it also carries warnings. For the other side of that miraculous unpredictability of action is lack of control over its effects. Action sets things in motion, and one cannot foresee even the effects of one’s own initiatives, let alone control what happens when they are entangled with other people’s initiatives in the public arena. Action is therefore deeply frustrating, for its results can turn out to be quite different from what the actor intended. It is because of this “haphazardness” of action amongst plural actors that political philosophers ever since Plato have tried to substitute for action a model of politics as *making* a work of art. Following the philosopher-king who sees the ideal model and molds his passive subjects to fit it, scheme after scheme has been elaborated for perfect societies in which everyone conforms to the author’s blueprint. The curious sterility of utopias comes from the absence within them of any scope for initiative, any room for plurality. Although it is now forty years since Arendt made this point, mainstream political philosophy is still caught in the same trap, still unwilling to take action and plurality seriously, still searching for theoretical principles so rationally compelling that even generations yet unborn must accept them, thus making redundant the haphazard contingency of accommodations reached in actual political arenas.

Arendt observes that there are some remedies for the predicaments of action, but she stresses their limited reach. One is simply the permanent possibility of taking *further* action to interrupt apparently inexorable processes or set politics off on a different direction, but that in itself does nothing to cure the damage of the past or make safe the unpredictable future. Only the human capacities to forgive and to promise can deal with these problems, and then only in part. Faced (as so many contemporary polities are) with the wearisome sequence of revenge for past wrongs that only provokes further revenge, forgiveness *can* break that chain, and recent efforts at reconciliation between the races in South Africa offer an impressive illustration of Arendt’s point. As she notes, however, no one can forgive himself:

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only the unpredictable cooperation of others can do that, and some evils are beyond forgiveness. Furthermore, this way of breaking the chain of consequences set off by action works only for *human* consequences; there is no remedy through forgiveness for the “action into nature” that sets off nuclear reaction or causes the extinction of species.

Another way of coping with the unpredictable consequences of plural initiatives is the human capacity to make and keep promises. Promises made to oneself have no reliability, but when plural persons come together to bind themselves for the future, the covenants they create among themselves can throw “islands of predictability” into the “ocean of uncertainty,” creating a new kind of assurance and enabling them to exercise power collectively. Contracts, treaties, and constitutions are all of this kind; they may be enormously strong and reliable, like the U.S. Constitution, or (like Hitler’s Munich agreement) they may be not worth the paper they are written on. In other words they are utterly contingent, quite unlike the hypothetical agreements reached in philosophers’ imaginations.

Arendt is well known for her celebration of action, particularly for the passages where she talks about the immortal fame earned by Athenian citizens when they engaged with their peers in the public realm. But *The Human Condition* is just as much concerned with action’s dangers, and with the myriad processes set off by human initiative and now raging out of control. She reminds us, of course, that we are not helpless animals: we can engage in further action, take initiatives to interrupt such processes, and try to bring them under control through agreements. But apart from the physical difficulties of gaining control over processes thoughtlessly set off by action into nature, she also reminds us of the political problems caused by plurality itself. In principle, if we can all agree to work together we can exercise great power; but agreement between plural persons is hard to achieve, and never safe from the disruptive initiatives of further actors.

As we stand at the threshold of a new millennium, the one safe prediction we can make is that, despite the continuation of processes already in motion, the open future will become an arena for countless human initiatives that are beyond our present

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imagination. Perhaps it is not too rash to make another prediction: that future readers will find food for thought and scope for debate in *The Human Condition*, picking up and developing different strands and themes in this extraordinary book. That would have suited Arendt very well. As she said toward the end of her life,

Each time you write something and you send it out into the world and it becomes public, obviously everybody is free to do with it what he pleases, and this is as it should be. I do not have any quarrel with this. You should not try to hold your hand now on whatever may happen to what you have been thinking for yourself. You should rather try to learn from what other people do with it.³

3. Remarks to the American Society of Christian Ethics, 1973. Library of Congress MSS Box 70, p. 011828.