

# The Human Condition

*"With word and deed we insert ourselves into the human world, and this insertion is like a second birth, in which we confirm and take upon ourselves the naked fact of our original physical appearance. This insertion ... springs from the beginning which came into the world when we were born and to which we respond by beginning something new on our own initiative."*

*"The task and potential greatness of mortals lie in their ability to produce things – works and deeds and words – which would deserve to be and, at least to a degree, are at home in everlastingness."*

## In a nutshell

The nature of being human is to do the unexpected, and every birth carries with it the possibility of a changed world.

## In a similar vein

Henri Bergson *Creative Evolution* (p 56)  
Martin Heidegger *Being and Time* (p 126)

# Hannah Arendt

German-born Hannah Arendt was one of America's leading twentieth-century intellectuals, rising to prominence with her study of Hitler and Stalin, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951), then achieving fame with *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (1962), a study of the trial of Nazi Adolf Eichmann that included her concept of "the banality of evil."

*The Human Condition* is the best expression of her larger philosophy. Though it is scholarly (she was an expert in classical Rome and Greece) and often difficult, it is genuinely original. And while it can be studied as a work of political philosophy, it also provides a very inspiring theory of human potential.

## The miracle of birth and action

Nature is essentially cyclical, Arendt says, a never-ending and inexorable process of living and dying that "only spells doom" to mortal beings. However, humans were given a way out of this through the ability to act. Free action interferes with the law of inexorable death by beginning something new. "Men, though they must die, are not born in order to die but in order to begin."

This is Arendt's concept of "natality," inspired by St. Augustine's famous statement, "That a beginning was made, man was created." Arendt writes:

*"It is in the nature of beginning that something new is started which cannot be expected from whatever may have happened before ... The new always happens against the overwhelming odds of statistical laws and their probability, which for all practical, everyday purposes amounts to certainty; the new therefore always appears in the guise of a miracle. The fact that man is capable of action means that the unexpected can be expected from him, that he is able to perform what is infinitely improbable. And this again is possible only because each man is unique, so that with each birth something uniquely new comes into the world."*

Being born is a miracle in itself, but the real glory is in the way we confirm our identity through our words and deeds. While animals can only behave

according to their programmed survival instincts and impulses, human beings can *act*, going beyond our selfish biological needs to bring something new into being whose value may be recognized in a social and public way. (Like Socrates drinking hemlock by his choice, or someone who gives their life for another, we can even act against our very survival instinct.) And because of this ability to make truly free decisions, our deeds are never quite predictable. Action, Arendt says, “seen from the viewpoint of the automatic processes which seem to determine the course of the world, looks like a miracle.” Our lives are about “the infinite improbability which occurs regularly.” In her other writings she suggests that the essence of fascist regimes is in their denial of this natality, or individual possibility, and this is what makes them so abhorrent.

### Forgiveness and promise keeping

Arendt recalls Jesus of Nazareth’s emphasis on action, particularly the act of forgiving, as an important point in history, since this discovery allowed us, not only God, the power to nullify past actions. This power Jesus put almost on the level of physical miracles, given its ability to transform worldly situations. Arendt writes:

*“Only through this constant mutual release from what they do can men remain free agents, only by constant willingness to change their minds and start again can they be trusted with so great a power as that to begin something new.”*

Whereas the wish for vengeance is automatic and thus a predictable action, the act of forgiving, because it seems to go against natural reactions, can never be predicted. Forgiveness has the character of real, thought-out action, and in this respect is more human than the animalistic reaction of revenge, because it frees both the forgiver and the forgiven. Action of this type is the only thing that prevents human lives from hurtling from birth to death without real meaning.

Arendt agrees with Nietzsche that what also marks out humans from other animals is the ability to make promises and keep them. Our basic unreliability is the price we pay for our freedom, but we have devised ways of keeping promises real, from social custom to legal contracts. The acts of forgiveness and promise keeping redeem humankind and take us to a new level. They are also creative actions that confirm our uniqueness. In the way these actions are expressed, “nobody is ever the same as anyone else who ever lived, lives or will live.”

### Labor, work, and action

Arendt delineates the three basic human activities of labor, work, and action:

- ❖ Labor is the activity of living, growing, and eventual decay that all humans experience; basically, staying alive. “The human condition of labor is life itself,” she says.
- ❖ Work is the unnatural activity that humans perform within a natural world, which can transcend or outlast this world, giving “a measure of permanence and durability upon the futility of mortal life and the fleeting character of human time.”
- ❖ Action is the only activity that does not require things or matter, and therefore is the essence of being human. Action also transcends the natural world, because “men, not Man, live on the earth and inhabit the world.” By this Arendt means that human beings are communal, political animals who seek to do things that are recognized by others.

### Rediscovering glory

In ancient Greece and Rome, Arendt notes, what mattered was what you did in the public realm. The lives and prospects of poor people and those without political rights (including slaves and women) were essentially carried out in the home; this private domain, whatever its benefits, brought with it no prospect of influence or real action. In contrast, men of means, free of the need to labor to survive and of the daily grind of the household, could be actors on the public stage, taking action to better or advance the whole of society.

In our time, she observes, it is the home that has become the focal point, and we have been reduced to consumers with little stomach for politics. We seek happiness while forsaking our privilege to do things that can change the world and benefit many. The ancient quest for glory seems alien to us, even distasteful, yet in reverting to being mere householders we are giving up our potential to have lives of truly autonomous action (what she calls the *vita activa*):

*“The distinction between man and animal runs right through the human species itself: only the best (aristoi), who constantly prove themselves to be the best, and who ‘prefer immortal fame to mortal things,’ are really human; the others, content with whatever pleasures nature will yield them, live and die like animals.”*

### Through love is our glory revealed

Humans can know everything there is to know about the natural world, or the world of objects, but will always fall short of knowing themselves (“jumping

over our own shadows", as Arendt calls it). *What* we are is our body, she notes, but *who* we are is disclosed in our words and deeds. We come to know who a person is not by being "for" or "against" them, but simply by spending time with them. Over a period of time, who a person is cannot help but be revealed. Thus, people live together not merely for emotional or material support, but in the sheer pleasure of seeing other people reveal their character. What is most interesting to us about an act is not the act itself, but the agent it reveals. The highest revelation of a person we call "glory."

Yet who we are may never be known by us; it is something that can only be seen fully by others:

*"For love, although it is one of the rarest occurrences in human lives, indeed possesses an unequalled power of self-revelation and an unequalled clarity of vision for the disclosure of who, precisely because it is unconcerned to the point of total unworldliness with what the loved person may be, with his qualities and shortcomings no less than with his achievements, failings and transgressions. Love, by reason of its passion, destroys the in-between which relates us to and separates us from others."*

Our ability to act gives all our lives a new beginning, providing fully justified hope and faith. Why faith? Because if we have the fundamental knowledge that people can act and can change, then it follows that we must have faith not only in them, but in the people we love and in the human race generally.

The beautiful paradox that Arendt leaves with us is that only through love (which by its nature is unworldly, private, and unpolitical) are we energized to have a real effect in public life.

#### Final comments

The conclusion of biologists and sociologists in the last 30 years that people are shaped by their brain's wiring, their genes, and their environment much more than had been thought would seem to pour cold water on Arendt's theories of action and decision.

And yet, from the viewpoint of history, which is after all the sum of millions of individual decisions, it would be wrong to suggest (as Hegel and Marx did) that the story of humanity involves a certain inevitability. Rather, as one of Arendt's key influences Martin Heidegger was keen to point out, individuals matter. For Arendt, history is a chronicle of the exceeding of expectations. People do amazing things that often even they do not wholly expect.

In the last pages of *The Human Condition*, Arendt admits that the "society of jobholders" that we have become allows people to abandon their individuality and behave as if they were simply a "function," instead of tackling head-on the trouble of living and truly thinking and acting for themselves. They simply become a passive reflection of their environment, an advanced animal instead of a real, aware, deciding person. For Arendt, being great is recognizing that you are not simply an animal with various urges for survival, and not merely a consumer with "tastes" or "preferences." Your birth was a truly new beginning, an opportunity for something to come into being that was not there before.

It can take a while to grasp Arendt's distinctions between labor, work, and action, and you may only understand her thinking fully on a second or third reading. Nevertheless, in its belief in the power of human action and unexpectedness, *The Human Condition* is a genuinely uplifting work.

#### Hannah Arendt

Born in Hanover, Germany in 1906, Arendt grew up in Konigsberg in a Jewish family. Her father died from syphilitic insanity when she was only 7, but she was close to her mother, an active German Social Democrat. Following high school Arendt studied theology at the University of Marburg, where one of her lecturers was Martin Heidegger. She had an affair with him (he was married), before leaving for the University of Heidelberg. Under her mentor, the philosopher Karl Jaspers, she completed a PhD dissertation there on the concept of love in St. Augustine's thought.

Arendt married in 1930. As the Nazi party rose in influence she was prevented from teaching in German universities and became involved in Zionist politics, from 1933 working for the German Zionist Organization. The Gestapo arrested her but she fled to Paris, working for another organization helping to rescue Jewish children from Austria and Czechoslovakia. Having divorced her first husband in 1940, she married Heinrich Blücher, but only a few months later the couple were interned in German camps in southern France. They escaped and found passage to the United States. Arendt received American citizenship in 1951. During the 1950s she moved in New York intellectual circles that included Mary McCarthy, worked as an editor, and developed The Origins of Totalitarianism.

Arendt became the first female professor of politics at Princeton University and also taught at the University of Chicago, Wesleyan University, and New York's New School for Social Research. She died in 1976. The first two volumes of her autobiographical *The Life of the Mind* (1978) and her Lectures on Kant's Philosophy (1982) were published posthumously. A good biography is *Elisabeth Young-Bruehl's Hannah Arendt: For Love of the World* (1982).