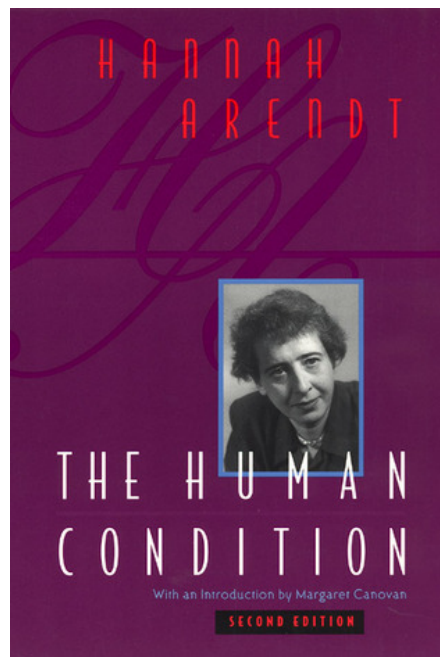




The Human Condition

Hannah Arendt , Margaret Canovan (Introduction)

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A work of striking originality bursting with unexpected insights, *The Human Condition* is a in many respects more relevant now than when it first appeared in 1958. In her study of the state of modern humanity, Hannah Arendt considers humankind from the perspective of the actions of which it is capable. The problems Arendt identified then--diminishing human agency and political freedom; the paradox that as human powers increase through technological and humanistic inquiry, we are less equipped to control the consequences of our actions—continue to confront us today.

The Human Condition Details

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Andrew says

This book is very deep. By this I mean not that it is a difficult read or that it is philosophical (it is both), but that it is as complicated and interesting as a deep-sea shipwreck. One can revisit this text over and over again and uncover new treasures. Agamben has called this work "practically without continuation" in any scholarly tradition. This is not because it is ignored, but because it is a very original and multi-faceted argument. Besides its main thrust of the sullyng of politics the book hints at and opens many lines of question in passing. Arendt puts forth a theory of the political (action), a critique of liberal society, discussions of goodness, suicide, technology, the modern, etc. etc. The accusation of elitism that Arendt faces - that the rise of lower classes into politics threatens politics - is not without foundation. However, more recent theorists such as Foucault, Agamben, and Rancière have continued to push us along this dangerous line of thought. The rise of the population into politics, intertwined with the technicalization and instrumentalization of the world has led to a confused moment in which public and private have lost there distinction and great horrors have become possible.

Bryan Wall says

A book that is all over the place and is not an easy read. I'm not entirely sure what she was trying to attempt.

Michael says

In *The Human Condition* (1958), Hannah Arendt discusses the public/private distinction with hope toward a more active political life, what she calls *viva active* (7). She argues that the dividing line between private and public has become blurred because we have come to understand political realms in terms of the family (28). She sees a "gulf" between private and public in ancient thought where people had to cross, and it took courage to cross this gulf because one left behind concerns of only his survival (33, 36).

Arendt argues that the social is a recent category as well, one that arises because of the spreading of the private into the public (38). For Arendt, privacy is deprivation, and we have lost this sense because of the "enormous enrichment of the private sphere" (38). Privacy is deprivation because we are "deprived of the possibility of achieving something more permanent than life itself" (58), the "transcendence" into a sort of earthly or political immortality (55). Before the "discovery of the intimate," privacy was thought to be characteristically animal, not fully human (46). The disappearance of the public realm means the "threatened liquidation of the private realm as well" (61).

Andrew says

This book is a good thought exercise in thinking through the categories of human activity.

I'm not at all convinced though that her distinctions between labour, work and action, with their respective phenomenological roles, can really hold up as domains of actual empirical activity. Good as an exercise in abstract conceptual distinction, but they just melt into each other as soon as you start to apply them to the

world.

Worse still is the insistence that "society" and "politics" can be conceived of as two sharply differentiated and mutually exclusive realms. As if social phenomena are automatic and uncontroversial processes and politics is a performative art with self affirmation, collective deliberation and mutual recognition as it's only true ends.

Since when have social issues been separable from politics? And if politics excludes bread and butter issues, what are we then left arguing about? Arguing just for the sake of arguing and "appearing" to others? I just think it's entirely unrealistic even if it were desirable.

It seems like she is looking for a way to distance herself from Marx, and lands on a rather abstract formalism which opposes the coagulation of politics and economics in Marx. But her concepts of politics and economics/society become unrecognisable and untenable as a consequence. While i like reading Homer as much as the next person, this is what happens when you go looking for answers to 20th century problems in ancient texts... It isn't convincing to me.

Not her best book, even if it is her most well known.

Hadrian says

A very unique approach to philosophy, to put it mildly.

Divides human life into three spheres: labor, action, and work. Describes the evolution of these three concepts, using historical examples from philosophy. Not an easy book, but a very stimulating one.

Tom Choi says

If I could recommend one work of philosophy, I'd turn to this magnificent book. And of the many interesting and influential philosophical texts from the 20th Century, this one is the most important of them all as it critically and sympathetically addresses our age, our problems and our fears.

In short, our ideas and our leaders (governments) have failed us. But against the spirit of pessimism of her German counterparts (notably Heidegger and Adorno, each representing a distinctly opposed sense of pessimism), Arendt says, Do not despair for there is hope after all. And there is hope because, for Arendt, it is that we have not quite understood the important way in which philosophical thought is linked to human activity (of living, of making and building things and of trying to live together). Whereas the "phenomenological turn" placed human consciousness as the source of all philosophical activity, Arendt is more realistic and pragmatic: philosophy begins with how we live. Any philosophy that forgets its foundations in the human condition is simply misguided. In a way, Arendt is Nietzsche with a great heart.

With "The Human Condition," Arendt surpasses her own immediate influences (Hegel, Nietzsche, Marx, Heidegger) as well as her notable peers (Sartre, Adorno, Wittgenstein, Russell).

And who is her only real rival? In my estimation: Immanuel Kant.

Cosmo says

This is an odd work.

Arendt mischaracterizes a great many thinkers over the course of the book; her "labor," "work," "action," trichotomy seems only intermittently useful; it is unclear whether or not her vision of political action has ever, or could ever, exist. And yet.

One of my fellows in our reading group suggested a nice way to get past the egregious misreadings of various thinkers (Locke and Smith have an especially hard time). He suggested that, instead of offering actual interpretive work, Arendt positions the thinkers she references as one would characters in a play. I think this is right.

That understanding fits with reading the book as a kind of polemic--but it's a polemic with at least the appearance of a serious scholarly apparatus. So, what to do with it? Arendt wants political action that may or may not be possible, that she attempts to illustrate by appealing to classical thought.

Obviously that is overly reductive, but it draws out the connections she shares with some of her fellow German emigres from the mid-century--most oddly, Leo Strauss. Arendt is often associated with the left; Strauss with the right. Nonetheless, I couldn't escape the feeling while reading *The Human Condition* that something about that German experience (e.g. Heidegger) had shaped them so thoroughly that they could not escape each other, and that their political associations are more a product of personal priors and who their students were than anything particularly substantive in their thought. It's something I'll have to consider more.

Strauss prizes the *vita contemplativa* while *The Human Condition* is an exhortation of the *vita activa*; Arendt writes elsewhere, however, of the necessity of the former (see, for instance, "Thinking and Moral Considerations"). They share similar Heideggerian misgivings about society and technology. Etc.

Anyway, much of the book strikes me as muddled, but it is occasionally wonderful. Well worth reading.

Ahmad Sharabiani says

The Human Condition, Hannah Arendt

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haetmonger says

still don't get how *SPOILER ALERT* thinking counts as action, ending the book with that quote from cato ("never is he more active than when he does nothing, never is he less alone than when he is by himself") seems like a weird note to end the book on. the first bit about thinking being active is understandable enough (activity != action for arendt), but the bit about being unalone by being by oneself isn't making sense to me in the context of arendt's philosophy

Andrew says

I'm afraid that I have difficulty with so much of the great intellectual powerhouses of the immediate postwar era, which is terrible, because I know they were a reasonable, humane bunch who tirelessly threw themselves towards lofty goals. But it seems to me that most of these cogitations on universal human aspiration are a bit suspect.

Hannah Arendt, you are clearly a stunningly intelligent person. Your phenomenological approach to the work-labor distinction is admirable for its rigor, and a great many of your observations are just as cutting as they were fifty years ago. But when you use the intellectual circles of classical Greece as an immortal standard, you're selling yourself a bit short. I have a great respect for many classicist principles, but if you fail to recognize a degree of contingency, then the substratum of your approach is inherently flawed. Sorry.

julieta says

I took months reading this book, and I loved it. What I keep mostly about reading it is changes. The possibility of change. How the world has changed and what brings about those ch ch changes.

The way everything is connected, philosophy, science, spirituality, and the way one change of view brings many more as consequence. Ver stimulating read, totally worth the effort, every page leaves you with a lot to think about. It applies to every day life and what we see happening in the world.

I underlined so much, but I will write here some of my favorites:

"Power is always, as we would say, a power potential and not unchangeable, measurable, and reliable entity like force or strength. While strength is the natural quality of an individual seen in isolation, power springs up between men when they act together, and vanishes the moment they disperse."

Another one on power:

" Power is actualized only where word and deed have not parted company, where words are not empty and deeds not brutal, where words are not used to veil intentions but to disclose realities and deeds are not used to violate and destroy but to establish relations and create new realities."

This one made me think so much of Mexico, my country, because it is exactly what she says, in opposite: word and deed have parted company, with politicians saying one thing, with tragedies happening every day and not being explained, and words are empty, and deeds are brutal, with so many people disappearing, or dying every single day. Words are only used by politicians to veil intentions, and deeds are used to violate and destroy so many lives.

But I will end with a more positive tone:

"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. With respect to this somebody who is unique it can be truly said that nobody was there before."

So yes, there is always the possibility of change, and that is something that gives me hope that things can always get better, because we all have a possibility of change.

Also, I love how she separates power from strength, and how power is more of a collective of people having the same view. That is the real power. And that also gives me hope, that in unity. A country can grow stronger, no matter what its defects or problems are, there is always the possibility that it will be better than its problems.

Bart Everson says

I read this, or tried to, when I was 20 years old. It was completely over my head. It was assigned in a 400-level religious studies class at Indiana University which was also over my head. The class met in a pub and I was slightly intoxicated most of the time. That may not have helped my comprehension, but the prof had known Hannah Arendt personally, and he told us, "She would have approved. She preferred hard liquor and could drink more than most mortals."

????? says

This is a complex book crammed full of brilliant insights—though with no clear structure enveloping them—and I can't even begin to do them all justice in a short review. The one insight that really stood out for me, though, is Hannah Arendt's conception of action in what she calls the public space. For Arendt, there are three fundamental human activities. Labor, the activity that corresponds to the biological process of the human body, with it we produce consumables that sustain our lives. "The human condition of labor is life itself." Work, the activity that provides an artificial world of things, with it we fabricate the objects that gives the human world its stability. "The human condition of work is worldliness." Action, the only activity that goes on directly between plural human beings without the mediation of things or matter, with this activity we insert ourselves into the human world. "The human condition of action is plurality." The former two activities, though interesting and illuminating in their own right, don't concern me much here. It's the third activity, namely action, that makes this book very important.

A life without action, says Arendt, is dead to the world because it is no longer lived among humans. To act, continues Arendt, is to take an initiative, to begin, to set something into motion. "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 is possible because each human is distinct, each individual is unique. Action, however, can only be performed in a public space where people meet, not as social beings their relationships mediated by things, but as political beings, individuals, each capable of action. And this is how politics should be, for to conceive of it in any other way is to ignore human plurality and coerce individuals.

Of course that means that action, as Arendt conceives it, can't happen under bourgeois democracy, nor can it happen under bureaucratic socialism, for in both instances there's no public space and it's the political representatives that act, whereas the people are merely social beings, docile and alienated. I'd argue, though, that under council democracy the construction of a public space is possible, even inevitable, for the goal there is to give every worker the capacity to act through a local council, and so when workers meet in a free space, unmediated by any objects, they're in fact creating a public space with the chief purpose of taking action. (I wonder if Arendt had written anything on council democracy, she must have been aware of the grassroots councils that formed during the unfortunately short-lived Hungarian Revolution of 1956.)

Rob says

This is an original and insightful book of philosophy that lives up to its lofty title. What Arendt deals with here is what politics should be about -- not manufactured wedge issues but the very way we live our lives.

The real strength of *The Human Condition* is how Arendt manages to escape the limits of conventional ideology. She doesn't easily fit into any political classification, nor does she propose a concrete program of reform. Instead she looks at the changes in human activity and how it has been perceived and regulated throughout time. In doing so this book is both an overview of Western political thought and a striking analysis of it. Arendt reveals the political value systems so important that we don't even realize we believe them.

With that said, this is still a 350 page book of philosophy, and as such is not really the most accessible thing in the world. I would recommend having at least some backing in classical and Marxist political thought, which Arendt draws on and critiques. While Arendt's prose style isn't the hardest to understand (there are much more obscuritan philosophers than her) it does take some effort. I didn't agree with all of the ideas presented in *The Human Condition* (her description of the "animal laborans" was somewhat classist, for instance), but they were interesting ideas nonetheless, and a conversation about these ideas would be much more valuable than the soundbite wars of modern politics.

All in all, *The Human Condition* is a challenging but ultimately rewarding read.

Patricia Carlton says

This reading was deeply intellectually satisfying while also challenging me to keep up. Arendt brought the ancient Greek philosophies and western tradition of philosophic thought to illuminate three areas of the modern human condition: labor; work; and action. Although we seem to be more of a society of animal laborans and jobholders, than man as toolmaker or policy maker, the advent of digital media and social networking may be building a new public space for speech and thought; (the realm of human possibility...the space where people define who they are and project who they might become). That is, perhaps the verbal and digital communications of a diverse and free public (free to speak on any number of issues) will become the space where not only are ideas born, but truths and revelations may be experienced.

Margaryta says

I had never heard of "The Human Condition" before one of my professors brought it up in class and said we would be reading it for the course. Seeing as how there is high praise for Arendt written on the back cover and the reviews on Goodreads are quite high, I expected to at least somewhat enjoy it. Philosophy is not within my field of reading – I get lost in the wordiness of it, and sometimes lose my patience with the arguments when they contradict themselves or have apparent loopholes if they are applied to the practical world.

That is exactly what happened with "The Human Condition". Most of what I read went right through me – I wasn't sure which strands and ideas to cling onto, and which should be seen as support material. The book is an overload of philosophical theory, name dropping and referencing to philosophy's past without thinking twice. And to someone who is familiar with the works of people like Hegel this won't be a problem. But

seeing as how I never touched anything of Hegel's, and my one and only brief experience with Nietzsche ended up with me hissing at the book and returning it to the friend I borrowed it from, I was lost in a sea of information. The arguments got quite redundant at times and, although the fancy language was impressive, it often took away from the argument.

Then again – every person is entitled to their own theory, thoughts, and ways of expressing them. Just because Arendt didn't speak to me doesn't mean she isn't worth reading. There were some extracts which I quoted for an assignment from the book that I thought were wonderful. This began from the very first page in the prologue, where Arendt talks about "the first "step toward escape from men's imprisonment to the earth"", which was a very simple thought that somehow I never considered, and it left a lasting impact on me. If there were more clear and simple but truthful thoughts like this, I would've enjoyed the book a lot more. Instead reading it became a chore that I'm only too glad to have completed.

????? says

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Xdyj says

A fascinating critique of modernity and defense of politics. Parts of it are arguably prophetic. imho it's worth reading whether or not you agree with her, because Arendt raised important questions & her eloquent writing style makes it quite fun to read. It was written years ago but IMHO it can serve as an excellent philosophical justification of the occupy movement.

blakeR says

This is a difficult read, although initially more frightening than it ends up actually being. Arendt's intellect is intimidating to say the least, and the manner in which she launches into a discussion of the human condition in the modern age is altogether unlike anything I've ever seen before -- "unique" is certainly an understatement. She completely renovates the discussion of political and social theory, but does it in a way that makes it seem logical and even natural. The scope of her knowledge is breathtaking, as she deftly handles everything from Ancient Greek property rights to modern day astrophysics, displaying an impressive working knowledge of Greek, Latin, German, French, and Italian in the process.

The book's greatest value is in its content. In addition to Arendt's revolutionary proposal of the *vita activa* (contrasted with the *vita contemplativa*) as broken up into the three separate areas of labor, work, and action, she also develops background arguments in each of these three categories that could have become books unto themselves. Her discussion of slavery in ancient Greece and Rome was one of the highlights. It was utterly fascinating to learn that unlike modern slaves that exist for production's sake, ancient slaves existed chiefly to free their masters from the necessities of everyday labor (day-to-day maintenance such as cleaning and cooking). This distinction does not seem like much on first glance, but it completely shifted the manner in which these two separate cultures thought about labor and human liberty:

The opinion that labor and work were despised in antiquity because only slaves were engaged in them is a prejudice of modern historians. The ancients reasoned the other way around and felt it necessary to possess slaves because of the slavish nature of all occupations that served the needs for the maintenance of life. It was precisely on these grounds that the institution of slavery was defended and justified. p.83

In order to have freedom to pursue the truly worthy human deeds (politics, oration, philosophy), they had to enslave these servants. Arendt's documentation of this shift is perhaps the most memorable part of the book.

I also enjoyed Arendt's writing style. Though she tended to lose me with some of her longer sentences, the meaning is always very clear when you take the time to parse down each phrase and aside. She is precise, if not concise. She is seemingly without pretension; neither arrogant in the way that she boldly takes down to size intellectual giants like Marx, Adam Smith, Bentham, Kant, or any of the Stoics or Epicureans, nor overly humble when she kneads the entire mass of political philosophy into a new (and more appropriate) form. Also, she seems to intuit that her ideas are complex and not immediately penetrable; some of the concepts in the first chapters that leave you scratching your head she knowingly addresses in more detail later on, without calling too much attention to the repetition and further elaboration. It's as if she knew you wouldn't have any idea what she was talking about the first time and wanted to inconspicuously help you, avoiding any embarrassment on your part.

My biggest problem with the book is its lack of stated purpose or overall thematic vision. I know she

mentioned early on that the idea was to get people to think more, and I can respect that. But I was left confused with what she was actually proposing. I understood that she seemed to value action higher than either work or labor, but she was fairly clear in her condemnation of some of the worse outcomes of unplanned action as well (unpredictability, irreversibility). So what, then, is a reasonable model to follow, according to Arendt? Or is it just about developing more appropriate categories for these ideas? The introduction (which I recommend reading AFTER the text itself) addresses this issue but doesn't fully resolve it either. All in all, the genius of the discussion itself more than makes up for this lack, and that indeed was probably her intention all along.

Cross-posted at Not Bad Movie and Book Reviews.
@blakerosser1

David Withun says

Arendt's book is a masterpiece of modern philosophy. Like any masterpiece, especially of philosophy, and even more especially of modern philosophy, this mistakes it very difficult to summarize. In this book, she draws on the history of Western thought from the ancient Jews, Greeks, and Romans through to Marx and Nietzsche to diagnose, as the title puts it, "the human condition." Nearly every page is filled with insight into what it means to be human. She moves swiftly through the ages, introducing us to the ideas that have shaped our modern way of life and our way of viewing ourselves. And she finally ends with where we are at and why a reevaluation of our own humanity is now more pressing than ever (and now even more pressing than when Arendt wrote the book): our worst fears have been realized. Man has been simultaneously reduced to the state of an animal – a biological machine of no lasting worth – and elevated to the position of a god – capable of destroying worlds. What are we to do now? I recommend that everyone read this book – and ponder every word deeply.
