

FORORD

THE JOY



TIL DEL I OF THINKING

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Abbreviations

HC = *The Human Condition*

OT = *The Origins of Totalitarianism*

LM = *The Life of the Mind*

MDT = *Men in Dark Times*

DTB = *Denktagebuch*

Plurality

If I were asked to characterise Arendt's thinking in just one word, I would answer the notion of *plurality*. Arendt started all her thinking from the fact that God created not Adam and then Eve out of Adam, but rather created *them*, as the original plurality. In *The Human Condition* we read the well-known line, "men, not Man, live on the earth and inhabit the world" (HC:7). This leads Arendt to state, "plurality is specifically *the* condition – not only the *conditio sine qua non*, but the *conditio per quam* – of all political life" (HC:7).

For Arendt plurality becomes a key concept. First, plurality is a factum; second, plurality is the "law" of the world – "living beings, men and animals, are not just in the world, they are *of the world*" (LM:20) –, and third, plurality is *the* human condition. Arendt replaces human nature with the human condition. This is important because her analysis of the extermination camps of totalitarianism had shown the attempt to change human nature. Human plurality and her concept of uniqueness belong together, as she phrases it in *The Human Condition*: "In man, otherness, which he shares with everything alive, become uniqueness, and human plurality is the paradoxical plurality of unique beings" (HC:176).¹

Plurality is not only experienced in the public communication between the citizens and their opinions; "plu-

rality", Arendt claims, is "inherent in every human being". Referring to Socrates' fundamental discovery, "that I do not only appear to others but also to myself", she remarks, "as long as I am alive, [I] live in the condition of plurality. I have to put up with myself, and nowhere does this I-with-myself show more clearly than in pure thought, always a dialogue between the two who I am" (Arendt 1990:86-87). In other words, "I in my identity ("being one") relate to myself. This curious thing that I am needs no plurality in order to establish difference; it carries the difference within itself when it says: 'I am I'" (Arendt 2003:184). Therefore, I am "in the company of the many the moment I start to act", and I am in company with myself the moment I think. Arendt suggests that we exercise not only our practical activities (labor, work, and action) but also our mental activities (thinking, willing, and judging) in accordance with the condition of human plurality. Thus, she reconnects the life of the human mind to the world.

Reality

There is a second important term, and that is reality. From the beginning until her late writing and thinking *reality* is a crucial term for Arendt. In *The Human Condition* we read, "To men the reality of the world is guaranteed by the presence of others, by its appearing to all" (HC:199). In her essay on Gotthold Ephraim Lessing she praised him for "an attitude that remained indebted to the world, never left the solid ground of the world, and never went to the extreme of sentimental utopianism" (MDT:5). And in Rosa Luxemburg's thinking she admired a lack of dogmatism, pointing out that "reality, in all its wonderful and all its frightful aspects [...] mattered most in her view, [...] even more than revolution itself" (MDT:39).

To grasp the objective world in its full reality, plurality plays a crucial role. According to Arendt, we distinguish ourselves and become visible in our singular specific uniqueness whenever we speak in public. The important point is that we then reveal not only ourselves but also our distinct views about the commonly shared world. Arendt's point is "that we know from experience that no one can adequately grasp the objective world in its full reality all on his own, because the world always shows and reveals itself to him from only one perspective, which corresponds to his standpoint in the world and is determined by it" (Arendt 2005:128).

Thought-trains

It is a proper description that Arendt's style of writing is less systematic and argumentative, and more essayistic. An expression that captures this style and one that she used many times is "thought-trains". "These thought-trains," Richard J. Bernstein writes "grounded in one's experiences, energize thinking and provide it with concrete specificity. They crisscross, interweave, reinforce each other, and sometimes conflict with each other. Following these different thought-trains requires some delicacy in distinguishing them from each other and seeing how they are interrelated" (Bernstein 2002:206f).

Arendt's way of thinking relates to the fact that we have to navigate without an anchored tradition since "a break not with tradition but with the authority of tradition" has become a fact. In her view, the break of tradition began with Cartesian modern times, and it became visible to everybody when no wisdom of politicians was still able to solve the political problems of the times, and no spiritual authority existed to settle the chaos of opinions and worldviews of the late 19th century. This does not mean that Arendt did not turn to a tradition within the history of philosophy. In fact, her journey of thinking the political begins in ancient Athens with Socrates and Plato and "what matters for the tradition that Plato introduced the concept of rulership into the political realm [...]. She finds an answer to her question what inspires political action centuries later in Montesquieu's revision of the tradition" (Arendt 2005:xxvi). On the journey, we find other thinkers who are part of her effort to rethink politics and moral philosophy. Among those are Immanuel Kant and Karl Jaspers, who "is the only successor Kant has ever had [because] he has like Kant more than once left the academic sphere and its conceptual language to address the general reading public" (Arendt 1968:74). Kant's faculty of judgment, "the judgment dealing with particulars - a

central concept in *The Critique of Judgment*, was turned by Arendt into a key-element in Kant's political philosophy" (Azoulay 2011:91). Moreover, what Kant called a way of thinking with "enlarged mentality" is captured in Arendt's definition of "representative thinking", which she described as the key faculty for political judgment.

Outside – inside tradition

There is good reason to argue, that she wrote from within the tradition of political philosophy. However, she did not feel comfortable with being placed as a philosopher. When Günter Gaus in a famous interview in 1964 asked about her place in philosophy, she answered,

I am afraid I have to protest. I do not belong to the circle of philosophers. My profession is, if one can speak of it at all, political theory [...] The expression 'political philosophy' which I avoid, is extremely burdened by tradition [...] I want to look at politics, so to speak, with eyes unclouded by philosophy. (Arendt 1994:2)

Gaus asked her, whether she wants "to achieve extensive influence with these works", or whether she believes "that such influence is no longer possible in these times, or is it simply not important to [her]?" Arendt answered,

If I may wax ironical, that is a masculine question: men always want to be terribly influential, but I see that as somewhat external. Do I imagine myself being influential? No. I want to understand. And if others understand – in the same sense that I have understood – that gives me a sense of satisfaction, like feeling at home. (Arendt 1994:3)

What does Arendt mean with "external"? Well, as she explicitly says, that a woman had never been accepted as a member of the philosophical circle. However, there is more. While "men always want to be terrible influential", Arendt, the female thinker, wants to understand. And understanding since it "creates depth not meaning. Politically, this is the same as becoming, making oneself, at home in the world. It is the process of *Verwurzelung*" (DTB:332), differs from being influential.

Yet, her books, such as *The Human Condition*, *On Revolution* and *Between Past and Future* are broadly discussed; on many conferences, her notions of "totalitarianism" and "plurality" have become central. Her opinion that not to think is the 'evil', is present in current debates on terrorism, her notions of 'conscious pariah' and 'parvenu' are

fruitful for today's debates on refugees and their ability to appear, to act and to be heard in the public realm. And last but not least, Arendt's conclusion from *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951) that men need full membership in a community, what she calls "a right to have rights" (Arendt 1951:296), has not lost relevance in our own time.²

Moreover, Arendt's work "has much to offer for a feminist political theory" (Dietz 1991:243). As I argued, for Arendt the notion of plurality became her key notion for both acting and thinking. According to Dietz, "Arendt's understanding of action and plurality as meaningful experiences of human freedom is something feminist theory should heed" (Dietz 1991:243). Dietz recommends Arendt's discussion of the *vita activa*, of labour, work, and action, for feminists.

A feminist theory of emancipation needs more than a focus on reproduction, birth, and children to sustain it. [...] For feminists, Arendt's conception of plurality as politics may provide a promising place to begin. Plurality reinforces the notion of what Iris Young calls a 'politics of difference,' and emphasizes the heterogeneity of citizens. (Dietz 1991:247)

The joy of thinking

How can we explain that Arendt who had no intentions to be "terrible influential" has become an important point of reference in political and ethical debates? Perhaps the answer lies in her observation that "active life", the phenomena of *vita activa*, - for example the trinity of labour, work, and action - cannot be grasped properly by scientific methods of deduction or by a philosophical logic of concepts (Schmidt 2018:69). Instead, events and things in the realm of human beings are in need of a different way of thinking if we want to understand them without subsuming their unique character under a system. Here Arendt's effort to develop "Denkfiguren" such as "break of tradition", "In-between", "natality", and the "gap between past and future" appeals to us because she invites us to experience the joy of thinking (Schmidt 2018:67).

I could easily continue with more examples that illustrate how rich her thoughts are for us in encountering the problems of our own time. But, since this is not possible here, I will finish by sharing Ursula Ludz' view that we can learn from Arendt that we "must get involved in thinking, in exercises of thought. In Kant's and Lessing's terms, to which Arendt likes to refer in these matters, men must practice *Selbstdenken* (self-thinking) and *an-der-Stelle-jedes-andern-Denken* (representative thinking), both

of which in Arendt's understanding display elements of plurality. It is thinking thus defined as the prerequisite of a 'new moral philosophy' as Arendt seems to have envisioned it, in parallel with her political philosophy" (Ludz 2007:807).

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NOTES

¹ For a more detailed presentation of Arendt's notion of plurality see Helgard Mahrtdt, "Hannah Arendt and The Concept of Plurality", in *Filosofisk supplement*, 14:2 (2018): "Pluralisme", 22-28.

² There are numerous publications on Arendt and the right to have rights; for some discussions see Parekh, Serena, *Hannah Arendt and the Challenge of Modernity: A Phenomenology of Human Rights*, New York: Routledge, 2008; Birmingham, Peg, *Hannah Arendt and Human Rights: The Predicament of Common Responsibility*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008; Gündogdu, Ayten, "'Perplexities of the Rights of Man': Arendt on the Apories of Human Rights", in *European Journal of Political Theory*, 11:1 (2012), 4-24.