

Engaging Vulnerability Research Seminar
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**The Fragility of the Human Condition:
Reflections on Hannah Arendt's 1958 *The Human Condition***

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Introduction

Hannah Arendt characterised the human condition in terms of *plurality* and the *unpredictability* and *irreversibility* of human action that flows from that plurality: we cannot know what the consequences of our actions are going to be and we cannot reverse those consequences once they have been set in motion. This human predicament defines – for Arendt – the vulnerability and fragility of the human condition. But against the unpredictability of human action she affirms the power of *promise* – the means by which we can make the world a little less unpredictable; and against the irreversibility of human action she affirms the power of *forgiveness* – the new beginning, the entirely new thing, the *natality*. So, we are irredeemably fragile, but through our collective action can make of our shared fragility a common world.

Life and work

Born 1906 in Germany. Death of father. Mother remarries. Clandestine affair with Heidegger. Completes doctorate under Jaspers. First marriage on rebound from Heidegger. Flees to France. Briefly interned. Escapes via Marseilles to USA with her second husband to be. Her mother follows. Lives as stateless person in US for ten years before gaining US citizenship. *The Human Condition* published in 1958. Sends copy to Heidegger telling him she had wanted to dedicate it to him. He eventually acknowledges receipt of it saying he doesn't intend to read it but has passed it on to his wife.

- She was first and foremost a thinker who (as she put it) thought ‘without bannisters’ – outside any disciplinary framework and discovering the detail of her argument in the process of writing
- She wrote most of her great work – including *The Human Condition* – in her third language after German which was her mother tongue and French which was her second acquired language. [As a writer she had a similar complex relation to her adopted language as Conrad.]
- Although often highly abstract her writing is invariably an urgent response to what for her were current existential concerns.

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The paradox of freedom

For Arendt, the human condition is a contested site. It is the residue of our labour, the work of our hands and minds, and whatever we make of it through our actions. These three contested versions of what constitutes the human condition form the pillars upon which *The Human Condition* is constructed: labour, work and action. As with all great texts its architectonics are sublimely simple.

Among the particular concerns that prompted *The Human Condition* was Arendt's growing unease regarding her adopted country and what she saw as the defining features of 'the American Dream'. She sensed that with the emergence of what she called a mass culture and the encroachment of a consumer society something vital – something essential to our humanity, something that against all the odds had survived totalitarianism – was being put at risk. *The Human Condition* is an attempt to define that 'something' and to reclaim it.

That 'something' was what she termed 'human plurality' which has the twofold character of equality and distinction. We are all equal by virtue of our common capacity for action; we are each distinctive by virtue of the particular actions we undertake. It is through our actions that we insert ourselves into the world of human affairs as unique agents, but, because our actions clash with myriad others, the consequences of our actions are unpredictable and uncertain. It is because we each have the freedom to act that none of us is able to predict the outcomes of our actions. We exist betwixt and between agency and indeterminacy – between our capacity to define ourselves through action and our incapacity to determine the consequences of our actions.

That is the paradox of freedom: our words and deeds reveal our agency, but this agency does not involve authorship of the ensuing story and its unpredictable outcomes. We are both actors and sufferers.

Thinking and acting

The only way to resolve that paradox, argued Arendt, is by thinking together and acting together. If through a process of deliberation – of thinking together about the common good [*phronesis*] – we are able to act collectively and with a sense of common purpose, then the world may become a little less unpredictable. Collective thought coupled with collective action gives us the power to shape our futures – provided, that is, that we recognize one another as both equal and different.

The power generated collectively is the only kind of power Arendt recognized and constitutes the only kind of politics she was willing to acknowledge. Power is a collectively generated resource and politics is the harnessing of that resource.

But it was a notion of politics that has to be defended on two fronts:

- against 'thoughtlessness' – as evidenced in the reduction of action into routinized behavior (witness her critique of Eichmann)
- against 'pure thought' – as evidenced in thinking abstracted from political reality (witness her critique of Heidegger)

For Arendt, thinking is dialogical ('the two in one'), deliberative, *phronetic*, and oriented towards the public good.

The ethics of political agency

‘When the chips are down’ was one of Arendt’s favorite phrases. When push comes to shove what are you – or I or we – going to do? Beneath its scholarly exposition *The Human Condition* presents the reader with precisely that kind of challenge: the ethical challenge as to what kind of a person we want to be; the moral challenge as to how we should treat one another; the political challenge as to how we can and should live together:

- We can be a cog in the wheel and deny our own agency. We can acquiesce to the idea that ‘there is no alternative’ to the condition within which we find ourselves. We can do as we are told and labour on accordingly.
- Or we can exercise our agency in an attempt to gain technological control over the unpredictable. We can ascribe to the competing ideology that we are lords of the universe. We can reshape the world in our own individualistic image.
- Or perhaps – and it is such a very big perhaps – we can live with the paradox of freedom and acknowledge that we really are all in it together. We can live, that is, in the *agon*: in the unending struggle for democratic renewal.

Promise and forgiveness

If we choose the latter (and, of course, choice must be balanced against chance) we shall have two indispensable resources of hope:

- the power of the binding promise that, as Arendt insists, pits itself against the unpredictability of the human condition – providing thereby a kind of provisional permanence in what she calls ‘an ocean of uncertainty’
- the power of forgiveness and reconciliation that, as she again maintains, pit themselves against the irreversibility of cause and effect – providing thereby the possibility new beginnings to set against enduring enmities and animosities.

Promise and forgiveness are expressions of the human capacity for natality. They constitute the power ‘to begin something new’:

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.

(Arendt, 1998 [1958], 240)

What she came to say

Arendt’s vision of the human condition is tragic in its acknowledgement that we live out the unpredictable and irreversible consequences of our own and others’ freedom of action. We are inextricably entangled in our own colliding freedoms. The only way through – the only way forward – is through deliberation, collective action and a sense of the common good:

- power is latent in human plurality, in mutuality and reciprocity: it is always betwixt and between;
- power must be distinguished from both force and strength: each is a denial of plurality and is antithetical to what Arendt understands by politics;
- power resides in an acknowledgement of the fragility of the human condition: its inescapable uncertainty and unpredictability

Arendt's question to us

The crucial question she left us with is something like:

How – in this world of unpredictability and incommensurability – can we think and act together in such a way as to ‘start again ... to begin something new’?

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