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Pearl Diver

Notes on
Hannah Arendt's
Thinking

Gertrud Sandqvist

Hannah Arendt always starts from experience, her own experience of what it means to live on the Earth. In that sense, she can be seen as a phenomenologist, like her teachers Martin Heidegger and Karl Jaspers.

When she takes on a problem, usually a key political and/or philosophical one, she starts to develop experience into an idea through her dialogical thinking. In doing this work, she harks back to Socrates and his “two-in-one” method, his dialogue with his daimon.

In Arendt’s case, that dialogue extends to other philosophers, but equally to poets and artists. The philosophers she returns to, apart from Jaspers and Heidegger, are mainly Socrates, Plato and Aristotle, church father and philosopher Augustine, Immanuel Kant, Søren Kierkegaard, the medieval monk Duns Scotus, René Descartes, Thomas Hobbes, Friedrich Nietzsche, Henri Bergson, and Karl Marx. The writers and poets are such as Franz Kafka, René Char, W.H. Auden, Paul Valéry, Rainer Maria Rilke and, of course, William Shakespeare and Fyodor Dostoevsky. She wrote about Rilke’s *Duino Elegies* as early as 1930, together with her then husband Günter Stern. Kafka and Char are central to her thinking about political life. Auden was a personal friend, as was Hermann Broch. Shakespeare is a constant companion. Arendt cites these philosophers and artists for their political and ethical insights. For her, both philosophers and artists practise the same kind of thinking. This makes her unique, and has consequences for her understanding of art’s relationship to a society, a *polis*.

There is also dialogue here with her very much alive contemporaries, first and foremost her beloved and partner Heinrich Blücher, but also other committed friends, those who were members of her “tribe”, such as Mary McCarthy, Eric and Anne Weil, Kurt Blumenfield, Walter Benjamin, and many more. They, along with the insights of the thinkers that she returns to, give her an understanding of more life experiences than her own.

She tests out her thinking on her students in lecture series. And in articles, essays, before they gradually become clear, reaching the reader in her books, foremost among them *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, *The Human Condition*, the collection of essays *Between Past and Future—Eight Exercises in Political Thought*, and *The Life of the Mind*. These monumental works blaze with insight, but also accommodate all the aspects that are embedded in her questions, which can seem so abstract: What is freedom? What is thinking? How are we to judge?

The method is what she, with Kant, calls an “enlarged mentality”. Not just her own experience, feelings, thoughts, but also those of many others who have different approaches, and whom she can trust. The method is based on individual examples, not norms, and could thus be called “aesthetic”. It could constitute a precondition for being able to judge and evaluate, and is based on taste. It is therefore rooted in relativity and not in supposed absolute ethical truths, something that Arendt knew the value of from bitter experience. I will return to how and why, and how the artist and artwork are central to this later.

She does not, however, question one premise underlying her thinking. And that is love, love of the world (what she calls *Amor Mundi*) and love of individual people who live in it. Ultimately also the love of life, but in that case love is a choice.

A central idea in Arendt's work is that of *natality*. As an alternative to Heidegger's being-towards-death, which applies to the discrete individual, she puts the beginning in the plural—we are born into the world. To this shared natality she adds (In *The Life of the Mind*), appearance.

“The world men are born into contains many things, natural and artificial, living and dead, transient and sempiternal, all of which have in common that they *appear* and hence are meant to be seen, heard, touched, tasted, and smelled, to be perceived by sentient creatures endowed with the appropriate sense organs. Nothing could appear, the word ‘appearance’ would make no sense, if recipients of appearance did not exist—living creatures able to acknowledge, recognize, and react to—in flight or desire, approval or disapproval, blame or praise—what is not merely there but appears to them and is meant for their perception. In this world we enter, appearing from a nowhere, and from which we disappear in a nowhere. *Being and appearance coincide*. [...] Nothing and nobody exists in this world whose very being does not presuppose a *spectator*. [...] Not Man but men inhabit this planet. Plurality is the law of the earth” (*LM*, p. 19).

Thus begins Arendt's last major opus, on Thinking, Willing (and Judging), *The Life of the Mind*. She quotes Auden: *Does God ever judge us by appearances? I suspect that he does*.

The section on Thinking ends with a description of *Diagonal Force*, a force generated by the thinking self, and which emerges from the thinker's position of a Now, between two infinite forces, the past and the future. She was been inspired to use this term by a parable of Kafka's. More on that later.

Since thinking, willing, and judging are crucial *political* qualities, it is of great significance that Arendt so explicitly connects these abstract concepts with the senses. I will come back to that, too.

Hannah Arendt is primarily seen as one of the greatest political thinkers of the twentieth century. But her understanding of what politics involves is much broader than the usual definitions. For her, politics is action, participating in the human community, and making an impression. Her political thinking will, of course, be important in this presentation.

In *The Life of the Mind*, she goes back to the place she personally loved and increasingly came to long for, the non-place that she says exists between no longer and not yet, a now that is a writing now, and which corresponds to the philosopher's *vita contemplativa*, in short, a wonder that the world exists, and how. If we are to follow her own thinking in *The Human Condition*, this would make her as much an artist as a philosopher.

On Being a Stateless Activist, 1933–1951

Hannah Arendt was born in 1906 and grew up in Königsberg (now Kaliningrad), the only child of Martha and Paul Arendt, two Social Democratic Jews with large,

wealthy families in Königsberg. The city had a large Jewish population that mainly came from Russia, and was a centre of the Jewish-German Enlightenment in the 18th century, with Immanuel Kant as its foremost philosopher. In a letter to Gersom Scholem in the 1960s, when the fury over her report *Eichmann in Jerusalem* was at its peak, she wrote that she never wanted to nor could deny that she was a Jew and a woman. According to her, that would be absurd. Her mother's way of moulding her childhood also taught her never to tolerate an antisemitic comment.

Hannah Arendt's father died of syphilis when she was eight years old. By then, he had been actively ill for six years with all the dreadful symptoms of syphilis, including paresis, a form of insanity. What that means for a little girl we can only speculate. In her secret poetry she writes about The Shadow. It seems to have followed her from at least her teenage years, that is, before the political situation in Germany turned melancholia into terror.

In 1924, Arendt became a student of theology and applied to Marburg, where, according to her, it was rumoured that the young philosophy professor Martin Heidegger taught his students to *think*. Throughout the rest of her life, Arendt equated thinking with life, or with a life worth living. She also became Heidegger's lover. The complications this brought with it led her to leave Marburg to complete her doctoral dissertation on St Augustine's concept of love with Karl Jaspers, a professor in Heidelberg (1929).

Heidegger was drawn to Nazism and served it as rector of the University of Marburg when Hitler came to power in 1933. Jaspers was an anti-Nazi and existentialist, and an ethical role model for many more than just Hannah Arendt. She maintained friendships with both of them for the rest of her life.

Another major influence was the Zionist Kurt Blumenfeld, who prompted her to become an activist and Zionist during the 1930s, in both Germany and France.

A quotation from Arendt's essay on Walter Benjamin gives a picture of her thinking:

"We Jews administer the intellectual property of a people which denies us the right and the ability to do so [...] It is easy to show the absurdity of our adversaries' arguments and prove that their enmity is unfounded. What would be gained by this? That their hatred is *genuine*. When all calumnies have been refuted, all distortions rectified, all false judgements about us rejected, antipathy will remain as something irrefutable. Anyone who does not realize this is beyond help" (Moritz Goldstein, *Der Kunstwart* 1912, quoted in *Men in Dark Times*, pp. 183-84).

After narrowly escaping the Gestapo in 1933, Arendt fled with her mother to Paris, where she was able to arrange travel for Jewish children to Palestine through the Zionist young people's organization Youth Aliyah.

In Paris, she came into contact with a group of intellectuals with whom she maintained ties for the rest of her life. One of the group was her future husband

Heinrich Blücher, a non-Jewish Spartacist and communist from Berlin, another Walter Benjamin. Another Eric Cohn-Bendit, the father of the Daniel who was a student leader in Paris in May 1968.

A shared passion of Arendt's and Blücher's was argumentative thinking. It was at this point that Arendt became politically aware outside of Zionism's sphere of interest. The lifelong dialogue with Blücher formed the basis of her thinking in both *The Origins of Totalitarianism* and *Between Past and Future*.

It was also during her Paris years that Arendt began to divide Jews into Parvenus and Pariahs, where she herself belonged to the Pariah group. One reason for this was her experiences in Paris' wealthy Jewish diaspora. Later, her identification with the Pariahs, the outcasts, led to her refusing any position that would make her an "exception woman" or an "exception Jew". When Princeton University in the United States appointed her professor in the 1950s, she almost turned the post down when the university hailed her as the first woman to be awarded a professorship.

When Arendt fled Germany, she became stateless. She remained stateless until she was granted U.S. citizenship in 1951, ten years after her escape to the United States from a French concentration camp.

After Horkheimer/Adorno's critical analysis *The Dialectics of the Enlightenment* in 1944, Arendt's *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951) is the first major analysis of the political systems that caused the world war, Nazism, and Stalinism. Here, Arendt traced the causes

of what she called Totalitarianism to the special kind of Jew-hatred known as antisemitism. The book is also one of the first analyses of the effects of imperialism and the nation-state. It also contains a critique of the modernity, both technological and ideological, that enables the surveillance of citizens. She writes that totalitarianism could be put into practice simply because it was possible.

In a totalitarian world, the human being is superfluous. That insight also applies today. Arendt describes the consequence for a stateless person with icy logic in the chapter *The Decline of the Nation-State and the End of the Rights of Man*. Without a nation where we are citizens we live a kind of shadow life, in which nothing we do has any political consequences, and in which there is no society to protect our human or political rights. Arendt sees through the talk about human rights, and calls it a sham if it is not backed up by political decisions and legislation. No one needs a stateless person. No one needs to bother with a stateless person. The only way for a stateless person to get back into society is to commit a crime—then the law has to pay attention to the act. (Giorgio Agamben's *Homo Sacer* (1995) is an extension of Arendt's insight.)

It is a furious piece of writing. Arendt herself had experienced everything it describes. Regrettably, this text is perhaps still the most relevant in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. Millions of undocumented people, refugees or not, live in the shadow societies that Arendt was the first to describe.

In the book Arendt describes totalitarianism, the way that the human being as such is no longer necessary,

as being the ultimate evil. When Jewish (and other) people are annihilated as vermin in the midst of a raging war, we are in a zone where all ethical laws are annulled. Arendt would return to the question of evil in several of her works. In *Eichmann in Jerusalem* she describes it as banal, in *The Life of the Mind* as a lack of capacity to think.

Being a Citizen

Notre héritage n'est précédé d'aucun testament. (Our heritage was left to us by no testament). Hannah Arendt returns to this stanza from the surrealist poet René Char's collection *Feuillets d'hypnos* (1946) on three occasions. It first appears in the preface to *Between Past and Future—Eight Exercises in Political Thought* (1961/1968), then in *On Revolution* (1963/1965), in its sixth chapter on the lost treasure of the revolutionary tradition, returning to it again in the last interview she gave, in 1973 (ORTF TV, with Roger Errera). Her associations with the Char quotation vary slightly, but it is clear that it was present in her thinking for at least 15 years. In the Errera interview, she develops her train of thought as follows:

“... we are entirely free to help ourselves wherever we can from the experiences and the thoughts of our past,” “[Freedom] rests only [...] on the conviction that actually every human being as a thinking being can reflect as well as I do and can therefore judge for himself, if he wants to” (Hannah Arendt, *The Last Interview and Other Conversations*, 2018).

She develops the second idea bound up with the Char quotation by quoting Char, who felt that the only

time he was really alive was when he was an active citizen in the French Resistance during World War Two (*BPF*). She has the quotation serve as a motto for the idea that the spontaneous formation of citizens' councils, soviets, in the first phase of the Russian Revolution and in the quashed revolution in Hungary in 1956, with their unpredictable decisions and actions, and their hierarchy built from the ground up, is the real significance of revolutionary action/thought, its forgotten or hidden treasure (*OR*).

According to Arendt, political freedom, the unpredictability of action, is the most valuable part of being a citizen—and also of being human. It is there, and should be there, for every participant in the *Polis*, in the community constituted by free people. Moving in that freedom, acting, is what is called politics and is part of our appearance in the world. It makes us real to each other. Arendt thinks this is what the founders of the American Revolution called *Public Happiness* (*OR*).

In the interview, Errera assumes that Arendt is a liberal. She replies that she is not at all sure about that. In fact, this is what Char's insight implies: the freedom to be able to choose from several different ways of thinking, to think for yourself. Arendt does not deny that such freedom can be seen as dangerous, but she points out that "there are no dangerous thoughts, for the simple reason that thinking itself is such a dangerous enterprise" (*The Last Interview*, p. 124).

Many have tried to guide Arendt's political home onto safer paths. She has been called an anarchist and a communist, as well as a conservative, or even a reactionary. She herself refused to follow a rule, a doctrine. She preferred to think in terms of the opportunities that each situation offers. This means that in every individual situation she makes a judgment evaluation, she judges, based on examples and not law or dogma. In this, she follows Immanuel Kant's early thinking in his *Critique of Moral Taste*, the book that he called *Critique of Aesthetic Judgement* (1790) 30 years later.

Arendt's interpretation of Kant has important implications for her understanding of the role of art in society.

On Freedom

Hannah Arendt approached a problem or a question much like a medieval scholastic would—in *Willing (LM)* she expresses admiration for Thomas Aquinas and Duns Scotus. She sets out the situation and presents the responses of various thinkers and poets. She then makes her evaluation based on these examples. Her conclusions are often astonishing.

Arendt called herself a political thinker and not a philosopher. The reason for that was her love for what she called "the world", and her fascination with it. A classical philosopher would prefer contemplation and spurn the world. Today, it is difficult to sustain the difference. Arendt is seen by most people as being a philosopher.

A classic philosophical problem is that of freedom, or freedom of will. The word “free” is found in a number of different combinations, including “the free world” or “free art”.

In Arendt’s essay *What is Freedom (BPF)* and in *Willing (LM)*, she traces the connection between freedom and will (or rather Willing), surprisingly enough, to the Apostle Paul and Church Father Augustine. For her, this means that the question of freedom is a late phenomenon—it did not concern the Greek philosophers ...

The question of freedom arises in the conflict of the will with itself. In the Epistle to the Romans in the New Testament, Paul discusses the question of the (un)freedom of the will: “I do not understand my own actions,” “I have become a question to myself” (*LM-W*, p. 65). Paul has discovered free will. It makes him want things that another part of him, the part that wants to obey the law, rejects. He has become a stumbling block to himself. But in so doing, he is the first to demonstrate an unpredictable freedom.

In his *Confessions* Augustine realizes that by pursuing Paul’s question (“I have become a question for myself”), he discovers the inner space in which freedom can arise (*LM-W*, 85). The greatest sin is disobedience, precisely because it is possible. Augustine speaks of *velle* and *nolle*, to will and not to will at the same time (*BPF*, p. 158).

Freedom has nothing to do with thinking, but, surprisingly enough, with will. Arendt develops her ideas with the aid of the philosophers of freedom/politicians, Thomas Paine and Lafayette: “to be free is sufficient (for man) that he wills it” (*BPF*, p. 163).

A few pages further on in Arendt's essay on freedom there is an unexpected turn. After discussing the relationship between free will and the political concept of sovereignty, and noting that in state-building they do not and cannot have anything to do with each other, "a community actually founded on this sovereign will would be built not on sand but on quicksand" (*BPF*, 164), she refers back to Augustine and The New Testament. She quotes Augustine's idea that man is free because every human being is a beginning, created after the universe was created. Indeed, man *is* a beginning because every human being steps into the creative world, each one is something completely new. To be human and to be free are one and the same thing (*BPF*, p. 167).

This is one of Arendt's central ideas, which she returns to in almost all her analyses after *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. Now, this well-known idea has an unexpected consequence.

Arendt points out that the New Testament word for "miracle" is difficult to translate, but means an unexpected turn, with or without divine intervention. The laws of nature are annulled by the miracle. All laws of nature, all automatic processes, spell ruin, decline, on a cosmic as well as on a human level. Therefore, no single act can save a human being, a nation or humankind.

But then there is freedom there, the completely unpredictable, as something that belongs to every human being. Freedom is a fantastic gift given to humanity (*OT*, p. 169), and every time a human being uses that gift and halts the natural disintegration with their actions, a miracle occurs! The miracle is something that *cannot*

be foreseen, it is the human being using their unique gift. Arendt argues that it is not the least bit superstitious to expect miracles, to look for the unforeseeable and unpredictable in political human action, indeed, in all the connections that people establish with each other. That is what freedom means.

The greatest miracle is that we exist at all, that the universe exists. It could just as easily not exist. Now that we are here—through freedom and action we can create our own reality.

This is Arendt when she works miracles through her thinking.

To Act—*Vita Activa*

“Whereas men have always been capable of destroying whatever was the product of human hands and have become capable today even of the potential destruction of what man did not make—the earth and earthly nature—men have never been and never will be able to undo or even control reliably any of the processes they start through action. Not even oblivion and confusion, which can cover up so efficiently the origin and responsibility for every single deed, are able to undo a deed or prevent its consequences. And this incapacity to undo what has been done is matched by an almost equally complete incapacity to foretell the consequences of any deed or even have reliable knowledge of its motives. [...] the reason why we are never able to foretell with certainty the outcome and end of any action is simply that action has no end. The process of a single deed can quite

literally endure throughout time until mankind itself has come to an end” (*The Human Condition*, pp. 232–33).

The Human Condition, or *Vita Activa* as Arendt herself preferred, is one of the key philosophical works of the twentieth century. Its ambition is magnificent. From the start, it was a desire to complement Karl Marx’s thinking about “labour”, in an attempt to understand how Marxism could degenerate into totalitarian Stalinism, i.e. it was a continuation of *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. But, during the nearly ten years that Arendt worked on it, it became something else, something much broader, namely, quite simply a description of the human condition in the world!

Like many important works *The Human Condition* was almost completely overlooked when it was published. One of the few enthusiasts was W.H. Auden, who felt that the book had been written for him—so close was it to the issues that were important to him.

Many more recent readers have felt the same: its idiosyncrasy in its own time was due to the fact that the questions it asked were seen as being more relevant fifty years later. For one thing, Arendt was one of the very few people in her time who did not see the progressive society and the way that science directly influenced nature through experiments as something wholly positive. From that perspective *The Human Condition* is prophetic.

The question Arendt asks in it is none other than: How do people live together in what we call our

civilization? Why does the world look the way it does? What are our conditions for living and functioning in it?

Hannah Arendt did not think highly of the philosophers she called “professional philosophers”. Nor of “professional politicians”. But she thought very highly of human beings and of our capacity to live together.

Arendt divided the conditions of our lives into three groups: *Animal Laborans*, *Homo Faber*, and *Zoon Politicon*, or labour, work, and action. This can be seen as a direct response to Marx, who had only one category, labour.

Labour—including all life-sustaining processes, from giving birth (which is actually called “labour”) to national economics. In the Greek *polis*, this was managed in the household by slaves and women. They did what they were supposed to do without understanding what they were doing, while the rulers of the household (free men) knew what they were supposed to do, but not how. Arendt also counts the entertainment industry in this category, as well as, of course, all the chores we do to survive, including everything entailed in the concept of “economy”. Of course, all human beings are involved in some way in the existence of *animal laborans*.

What can help *animal laborans* to attain another aspect of life and work is *homo faber*, the human being who makes things. Everything that survives a life span is part of the world of *homo faber*, everything from instrument makers to artists (with some reservations).

Homo faber helps *animal laborans* with various kinds of implements. Every time we talk about “values”, material or immaterial, we are in the world of *Homo*

Faber. That also includes science, institution building, in short, everything that can be made—and destroyed. According to Arendt, despots prefer the world of *homo faber*. It is there that political sovereignty can be exercised, i.e. sovereignty or integrity for an autocrat who can operate independently of other people.

The world of politics, ultimately, the world that people create through their actions, their deeds (we might perhaps say their performativity) are the world that we humans shape when we leave the private sphere of labour and work, and act together in a *polis*, politically.

The ancient Greeks compared the actions on that stage to flute playing and navigation, i.e. to something that requires virtuosity. But it is also a totally unpredictable arena, and the actions that human beings collectively carry out on it are irreversible, they cannot be taken back.

Arendt saw with disquiet that the scientists of her time were engaging in this action when they manipulated or altered nature. She quotes the atomic physicist Wernher von Braun: “basic research is when I am doing what I don’t know what I’m doing” (*HC*, p. 231) with great uneasiness.

When Hannah Arendt was stateless, she saw life as a citizen and participant in the shared conversation as the only thing that made life real in an action that had consequences. René Char experienced something similar in the French Resistance. When Arendt is writing *The*

Human Condition, she also sees the dangers in action. At the same time, she cannot advocate that a citizen avoid (political) action and focus on thinking, like a true philosopher. The unpredictability of human beings, our ability to arrest the automatic natural processes through actions, the miracle of freedom entailed in this is what Arendt sees as real life. Despite everything, she is prepared to take the risk.

But is there no antidote?

Animal laborans was helped to escape from his eternal Grótti millstone (1) by homo faber's ability to make works that last and instruments that assist him in his labours. *Homo faber* could avoid a feeling of meaninglessness amid all the gadgets, escape the "devaluation of all values" by speaking and acting in the shared political space, but what is the chance of the actions carried out in the political space being annulled? We saw that the result of the action cannot be reversed or predicted. And an action can just as easily be destructive as constructive, since it is unpredictable in its freedom. At the same time, the consequences always affect other people in the shared space (*HC*, 236).

Here, Arendt turns to an unexpected source, Jesus of Nazareth. According to her, his discovery of the mechanism of *forgiveness* is something completely new. It was not in the Jewish, Greek or Roman traditions.

Arendt thinks that forgiveness, not by God, but between fellow human beings, is also political, in the sense that it is the only action that can annul the result of a previous action. But only for those who did

not understand the wrong they were doing, repent, and ask forgiveness. Then their fellow human being should always forgive them (*HC*, 240). (The second device for mitigating the consequences of the action is the promise.) It is this insight of Hannah Arendt's that forms the basis for the political tool, the Truth Commission.

Transgressions can and should be forgiven, according to Arendt. Whereas real evil should not. That is to be judged. Here we hear the Holocaust survivor trying to think the unthinkable. She gives a new answer in *Eichmann in Jerusalem*.

Love

Hannah Arendt's entire thinking is founded on love in the sense of love for the world, *Amor Mundi*, but also on the insight that all human beings have been born, and therefore constitute a new beginning rooted in at least one form of love. She quotes Augustine's ultimate declaration of love *volo ut sis* (I want you to be) in her doctoral dissertation on her concept of love.

Julia Kristeva praises Arendt and calls her a genius (*Hannah Arendt*, 2001):

"In the shadows of the Holocaust, it is worth noting that it was a woman, a Jewish woman, Hannah Arendt, who took the initiative in reopening the question of birth by breathing new meaning into the freedom of being. And therein lies the brilliance of her genius, whose very core touches on the crisis of modern culture along with its ultimate fate of life or death" (p 48).

In *The Human Condition* Arendt writes more explicitly about the power of love in relation to the possibility forgiveness offers to begin again. She quotes Jesus' words in the New Testament about a sinful woman: "Her sins which are many are forgiven; for she loved much: but to whom little is forgiven, the same loveth little" (*HC*, pp. 241-42). She goes on to point out that only love has the power to forgive. "For love, although it is one of the rarest occurrences in human lives, indeed possess an unequaled power of self-revelation and an unequaled 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 [...] destroys the in-between which relates us to and separates us from others" (*HC*, p. 242). Since love is not worldly, it is not only a-political, but anti-political, and the most powerful of all anti-political forces.

And outside of the magic of love, what is there? Friendship, respect. Then we are back in the polis, where there is always a distance between people.

Exemplars

Hannah Arendt has two role models. For thinking, it is Socrates, with his *eme emauto*, thinking with himself, and his remark that he would rather be the one against whom wrongdoing is done than the one who does wrong, for the simple reason that it is not possible to think with a murderer.

For action, it is Jesus of Nazareth, who understood the relationship between miracle and action, and who is as original and unpredictable as Socrates (*HC*, 247).

The Social

The political space is not the same as the “social”. Arendt is hard on the zone between the private and the public that she calls “the social”.

In the political space, everyone is equal. Every voice is of equal worth. This is the Athenian city-state. A free man without property is worth as much as one with. (Arendt ignores the fact that 98% of the population, women and slaves, did not count—the question is whether they were seen as human beings.)

Meanwhile, in the social space (from the Latin *societas*, society, companions), the boundaries between the private and the public are blurred, or even erased. “Society always demands that its members act as though they were members of one enormous family which has only one opinion and one interest” (*HC*, 39). She compares it to salon culture, where only one opinion counts, or to the most social form of government, the one run by a bureaucracy(!). In a bureaucracy, no one is responsible, everything is a matter of procedure, how the group thinks something should be dealt with. *Action*, political action, is impossible in the social state, known in the twentieth century as *mass society*.

The public space holds us together, but prevents us from falling into each other’s arms. Arendt compares it to the function of a table, which simultaneously unites and

divides us. She likens the strange thing about the social situation, in which we seem to have an intimacy with people we do not know at all, to a spiritualistic *séance* “where a number of people gathered around a table might suddenly, through some magic trick, see the table vanish from their midst, so that two persons sitting opposite each other were no longer separated but also would be entirely unrelated to each other by anything tangible” (*HC*, p. 53).

This aversion to “the social” recurs in her comparison between the American and French revolutions in *On Revolution*. Many readers have been astounded by her glorification of the Founding Fathers in the American Revolution and her condemnation of the French Revolution because of its focus on the “social question”: Arendt argues that a distinction should be made between a political revolution that affects the political rights of citizens, like the American one, partly the Russian one, and later the Hungarian and Portuguese revolutions, and the conflation of political rights (which soon disappeared) with the alleviation of social distress by the French Revolution. She believes that such revolutions are easily turned into a bloodbath, and that an order similar to the one that previously prevailed is then reinstated. It was not long before Napoleon became absolute emperor.

The Place of Art in the Polis

Hannah Arendt makes several suggestions as to why art (poetry, music, drama, visual arts) is important to the Polis. She moves the artist between the categories

she sets up for human life in *The Human Condition*. The artist is *Homo Faber*, the maker, when they follow the ancient scheme. Or they uphold the narrative of the world, i.e. they take action. They are thus an actor on the world's stage, along with other political figures, with the difference that their artwork is specifically an artwork, something that survives the now of the action. In *The Human Condition*, Arendt speculates that the artist has outright taken over the Platonic philosopher's ability to feel *thaumazein*, wonder at the world. By focusing on the process rather than on the fabrication of a work of art, the artist, like the philosopher, engages in contemplation in speechless wonder at the world (*HC*, p. 304). Indeed, it is the artist's story that makes the world meaningful! It *illuminates* the world (*HC*, p. 324).

But Arendt has not thought through the function of art in the *polis*. In her essay *The Crisis in Culture* (*BPF*) she examines *how* art works in the *polis*. First, she again defines art as an action and thus as a *political possibility* (*BPF*, p. 213–14). She looks to Immanuel Kant and his first draft of the *Critique of Judgement*. In this work of his youth Kant examines whether art, the work of art, is of any importance in the ability to make ethical judgments through the sensory, i.e., aesthetic, example. (He abandoned this idea in favour of an ethical judgment.) For Hannah Arendt, who had observed from far too close how little ethics or morality (the same word in Greek and Latin, respectively, both meaning customs, approach) meant when the whole of existence was at stake (*HC*, p 238), it was necessary to find another way. Could it be

that art has a political significance, that taste is one form of *political* influence? (*BPF*, p. 215).

The young Kant had an idea that the work of art, in itself an impartial work (i.e. no one could profit from it, it exists solely because it is beautiful, this is at the beginning of independent art) could be seen and judged as an example dependent on taste. To be able to do this, it takes a society, people who together through their *sensus communis* (the common sense that in the contemplation of beautiful art unites “imagination, intellect, spirit and taste” (*LM*, p. 262) in judging on the basis of the individual example. The beauty of the work shows whether it is good. Kant thinks that, in order to make an aesthetic judgment, the individual must judge not only according to their own taste, but also according to how other people perceive the work. An enlarged mentality, in which the viewer in contemplating the artwork abandons self and seeks out other people’s thoughts and experiences of the work. Contemplation of the artwork makes us selfless! (*BPF*, pp. 219–24).

Arendt goes a step further—if taste is something that can be shared and trained, it is not idiosyncratic. She quotes Cicero: “I prefer before heaven to go astray with Plato rather than hold true views with his opponents” (*BPF*, pp. 224–25). According to Arendt, this is a matter of taste, of preferences. It is just as important to train the senses as thinking. According to Arendt, Cicero’s remark means there are no absolute truths in either philosophy or art—it is a question of taste, of judgment (p. 225).

Here she unleashes the mind, which is truly revolutionary. Should art have a completely different political content than expressing opinions through a work? Is the capacity to judge art in fact crucial to one of the most important tasks of the *polis*, judging in ethical matters, in short, judging in relation to right and wrong?

We do not know what Arendt's final word would have been. The last word she wrote on her typewriter, on December 4, 1975, was *Judging*. She would presumably have begun writing the last part of *The Life of the Mind* the following morning. On the evening of the 4th, she died undramatically in her armchair, after inviting a couple of friends to dinner.

Mary McCarthy, the friend who completed and released *The Life of the Mind* posthumously, published lecture notes on Judging in an appendix. Another friend, Anne Weil, had seen her working on them. We can be pretty sure that the last question on her mind was that of the significance of art for and in the *polis*.

When Arendt reads Kant, she notes that he saw both the human being and art as existing for their own sake, we/it have/has no purpose, no use (pp 271–272). On the other hand, both art and human actions have value as examples. This means they have a value in the *polis* as objects of judgment. Taste, that most private of all the senses, thereby becomes something that can be shared. We can only demonstrate our taste together with others. Taste thereby becomes we have in common, and we can train our capacity to grasp ethical problems through the aesthetic example.

We do not know where this would lead. But we see that she was not finished with the question of art and its place in society.

The Banality of Evil—On Laughter and Conscience

Eichmann in Jerusalem (1963) is a series of reports that Arendt wrote when she covered the Eichmann trial in Jerusalem for *The New Yorker* in 1961. Arendt rails against Eichmann, the least worthy representative of pure evil imaginable, a man who, according to her, could not utter a sentence without contradicting himself or coming up with a cliché. The finale comes when Eichmann is to be hanged, on the night of May 31 and June 1, 1962. He is literally standing on the gallows. Eichmann has declared that as a Nazi, he does not believe in God and the after-life. He then says: “Gentlemen, we shall soon meet again. Such is the fate of all people. Long live Germany, long live Argentina, long live Austria! I will never forget them.” That was his last cliché. Arendt says: “It was as if in these last minutes he summed up everything that this long course in human meanness had taught us: the banality of evil is too horrible to be expressed in words” (*The Banal Evil: Eichmann in Jerusalem*, p 239). In the epilogue, she clarifies this when she writes the speech that she thinks the Israeli judges should have delivered. “Just as you have supported and pursued a policy of not sharing the earth with the Jewish people, nor with many other peoples—just as if you and your superiors had any right to decide which peoples may and may not dwell on the earth—we believe that no member of the human race could conceivably wish to share the earth with you.

That is the reason—and the only reason—why you must be hanged” (*EJ*, p. 265). She tries to judge based on examples, not on the basis of law. But it sounds more like the Old Testament “an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth”. Here I think Arendt had not thought it out.

Arendt laughed her way through her coverage of the trial in Jerusalem. She saw Eichmann as a clown (*The Last Interview*, p. 27). In another interview, she makes it explicit that by “the banality of evil” she did not at all mean that everyone could commit the same crimes as Eichmann, but that in his way of expressing himself Eichmann was so stupid. “There’s nothing deep about it—nothing demonic! There’s simply the reluctance ever to imagine what the other person is experiencing, right?” (*LI*, p. 48). She quotes Berthold Brecht: “The great political criminals must be exposed and exposed especially to laughter. They are not great political criminals, but people who permitted great political crimes, which is something entirely different.” (*LI*, 131).

The furious reaction, particularly from various Jewish groups, to Arendt’s volume of reportage was totally unexpected and very painful for Arendt. She defended herself in her own way.

Her friend, the art critic Harold Rosenberg, was one of the detractors. They sat in her home and he thundered on. She said nothing, and listened without defending herself. When he was done, she asked him to make them a drink so they could relax as good friends. Rosenberg was impressed and grateful that she saw their friendship as more important than who was right (Young

Breuhl, *For Love of the World*, p. 352). Was this what she meant by her Cicero quotation in *The Crisis in Culture*, and repeated in her notes on *Judging?* That friendship, what we have in common, comes before opinions, even before truth?

Arendt continued to think about the problems of evil and about the reactions to her book, and gave two more responses. One is the essay *Truth and Politics* (BPF). In it she compares facts, easy to hide but impossible to deny, with truth. She quotes Staretz Zosima's reply to the lying villain and father Karamazov in Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*, when he asks how he is to achieve salvation: "Above all, never lie to yourself." It was Eichmann's self-deception that made his atrocities possible.

The second response is found in the *Thinking* section in *The Life of the Mind*, where she links thinking to conscience, that is, to a very special form of thinking that entails the ability to put yourself in someone else's place. Thinking as empathy—or imagination.

The encounter with *Eichmann in Jerusalem* freed her from the question that had lain there since she tried to use *The Origins of Totalitarianism* to understand what cannot be understood—the absolute evil of totalitarianism. Her answer was—absolute evil cannot be understood because it does not exist. What is left are banal people who are unable to recognise the consequences of their actions—or inactions. They are all the more dangerous. "They" can quickly become "we".

Thinking and the senses

When Hannah Arendt thinks through the concept of “thinking”, the very core of philosophy, she does so in relation to our five senses, the information our body gives us about the world around us. This is a phenomenological way of thinking.

In *The Human Condition*, she points out that, ever since the telescope changed Galileo’s physical world view, we know that we cannot trust our senses. René Descartes’ *Cogito, ergo sum* is preceded by *de omnibus dubitandum est* (doubt everything) (*HC*, p. 273). Arendt thinks, with quantum physicist Werner von Heisenberg, that we cannot even trust what our instruments tell us about the universe or reality—instead of objective properties, we encounter what humankind’s invented instruments can measure. Instead of nature or the universe, we encounter ourselves. (*HC*, p. 261).

In *The Life of the Mind*, written fifteen years later, she writes “To each of the five senses corresponds a specific, sensorily perceptible property of the world. Our world is visible because we have vision, audible because we are hearing, touchable and full of odors and tastes because we have touch, smell and taste” (*LM-T*, p. 50). She adds a sixth sense, that of reality, something that she compares to Thomas Aquinas’ *sensus communis* (Kant used the concept for his own purposes later on). For Thomas, the *sensus communis* was an inner sense that allowed us to interpret the signals from the external senses (*LM-T*, p. 51). Arendt adds Duns Scotus’ concept of *Haecceity* (thisness) to describe this inner common sense that makes the world real (*LM-W*, p. 120).

With zoologist Adolf Portmann, she thinks of the world as a stage, a place for the human species to present itself (*Selbstdarstellung*). *Appearance* is dependent on our senses: “*whatever can see wants to be seen, whatever can hear calls out to be heard, whatever can touch presents itself to be touched*” (*LM-T*, p. 29, Arendt’s italics). In this world of surface, man shows himself out of a need to show who he is. Superficial? Yes, indeed, the world consists of surface, of surfaces. This is the world we are born into, where we present ourselves and which we are to leave. The visual sense deceives us, but we have no other way of orienting ourselves. As little as any other sense, for example, taste, it cannot give us anything other than relative “truth”. This is the human condition on Earth.

Thinking with yourself

But there is a world independent of the senses, and that is the one known as the contemplative world, or the inner world, the one to which the classical philosophers retreat when they want to think in wonder (*thaumazein*) about the world. Here human beings make themselves invisible to the world and use their inner sense. In one reading, they no longer exist for the world (*LM-T*, p. 51). Here Socrates’ insights and method of thinking-with-oneself (*eme emauto*) become important, as does Franz Kafka’s parable.

Socrates’ method, according to Arendt, is to “unfreeze” accepted concepts in dialogue with himself and in dialogue with others: “*The word ‘house’ is something like a frozen thought that thinking must unfreeze*” (*LM-T*, p. 171, Arendt’s italics).

This “unfreezing” does not mean that Socrates teaches anything, on the contrary. He calls himself a gadfly or a midwife—in the ancient Greek world midwives were “sterile” women who could no longer have children. Plato calls him an electric ray, because Socrates paralyzes others as well as himself. He does not know the answers – he gets his partners in dialogue to realize that they do not know them either (*LM-T*, p. 172). Socrates stings like a ray, so that citizens will no longer “sleep undisturbed for the rest of their lives” (*LM-T*). He wants them to think and test things out, an *activity* without which a human being is not fully alive. He is a midwife because he helps *others* to think (*LM-T*, p. 173).

This means that, according to Arendt, Socrates was not a philosopher! He taught nothing other than to get people to think for themselves. And as with politics, thinking is something that for Arendt makes life worth living, indeed, it makes us alive. Socrates is like the wind, invisible, but we feel its presence (*LM-T*, p. 174).

So how do we do what we do when we think? Here, Socrates really had something to teach us. His thinking is dialogical, he thinks with himself, and with the part of himself that he calls his “daimon”, i.e. his conscience.

Socrates has two maxims about thinking: “It is better to be wronged than to do wrong.” And “It would be better for me that my lyre or a chorus I directed would be out of tune and loud with discord, and that multitudes of men would be in discord with me, than that I, *being one*, should be out of harmony with myself and contradict me” (*LM-T*, p. 181).

In *eme emauto*, the inner dialogue with myself, I think. All thinking is thus dialogical, a conversation with myself. In that conversation, when I have finished thinking, I have to agree with myself (*LM-T*, p. 186).

The two who conduct the inner dialogue must, according to Socrates, be “in good shape”, they must be *friends*. Otherwise, the thinking is torn apart by internal contradictions. That is why it is better to suffer injustice than to do wrong. Thinking becomes impossible if one party to this inner dialogue is a murderer (*LM-T*, pp. 187–88). In fact, for Arendt, this is the only reason why a human being should not murder another human being! Thinking becomes impossible. She quotes Richard III’s monologues in Shakespeare: “What do I fear? Myself? There is none else by: Richard loves Richard: that is I am I. Is there a murderer here? No. Yes, I am: Then fly: what? From myself? Great reason why: Lest I revenge. What? myself upon myself? Alack! I love myself. Wherefore? For any good that I myself have done unto myself? O! no: alas! I rather hate myself. I am a villain, Yet I lie, I am not. Fool, of thyself speak well: fool do not flatter” (*LM-T*, p. 189).

It was this sort of thinking that Eichmann was incapable of, where he got lost in banalities. According to Arendt, it is possible for all human beings to think in Socratic unity with themselves, because everyone has their inner *daimon*. This is not for specialists in thinking, for philosophers. Socrates was not a philosopher. Neither was Arendt herself.

The Diagonal Force

“He has two antagonists: the first presses him from behind, from his origin. The second blocks the road in front of him. He gives battle to both. Actually, the first supports him in the fight with the second, for he wants to push him forward, and in the same way the second supports him with the first, since he drives him back. But it is only theoretically so. For it is not only the two antagonists who are there, but himself as well, and who really knows his intentions? His dream, though, is that some time in an unguarded moment—and this, it must be admitted, would require a night darker than any night has ever been yet—he will jump out of the fighting line and be promoted, on account of his experience in fighting, to the position of umpire over his antagonists in their fight with each other” (Franz Kafka, *HE*, quoted in *LM-T*, p. 202).

Arendt refers to Kafka’s parable twice, the first time in the preface to *Between Past and Future*. The second time, the parable concludes her text about thinking, in the question of *where* thinking takes place. The figure fighting between the past and the future in the Now is the same both times. Arendt simply clarifies that the position here, in a bubble that is the non-time of the present, is the non-place where we think. She cites Friedrich Nietzsche’s idea of eternal recurrence and William Blake: “Hold infinity in the palm of your hand/and Eternity in an hour.” Both Nietzsche and Blake were important to her thinking, long before Postmodernity rediscovered them. As always, Arendt doesn’t distinguish between different kinds of thinking. Poetry and philosophy are one.

Kafka wants to escape time to a place where he can judge the world. For Arendt, the thinking activity in the Now is already such a place, a Now (*nunc stans*), a kind of non-place from where what she calls *The Diagonal Force*, which has its beginnings in the moment of Now, can be used for thinking. This diagonal force gets its direction from the pressure exerted between the past and the future. The point is not to run away from the power of the ability to think. “Each new generation, every new human being, as he becomes conscious of being inserted between an infinite past and an infinite future, must discover and ploddingly pave anew the path of thought” (*LM-T*, 210).

Hannah Arendt ends the text about thinking, the last one she had time to complete, by comparing herself to a pearl diver who finds treasures of thought, its “coral” and “pearls”. She used the same metaphor about her friend Walter Benjamin (*Men in Dark Times* 1968, p. 193 ff) to describe his rescue operations in relation to the past.

“Full fathom five thy father lies,
Of his bones are coral made,
These are pearls that were his eyes.
Nothing of him that doth fade
But doth suffer a sea-change
Into something rich and strange”
(Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, Act 1, scene 2, *LM-T*, 212).

Our shared world and science

In *The Human Condition*, Arendt puts two questions to humankind: How is it that people no longer want to live on earth and what are the consequences for our community, for what Arendt calls *the World*? The very quintessence of the human condition has been to live in what is probably the only place in the universe where human beings can breathe and move around without artificial means. Why do we seem to be quite seriously planning to colonize other planets? How did we end up in this impasse?

The second question concerns the automation of work. This is central to an opus that was originally intended to be an answer to Marx's concept of "Labour". If we have created a society in which everyone is a "jobholder", where the only meaningful categorization of human beings is bound up with what a person does and not who they are, then of course the automation of work (taken even further today with the development of Artificial Intelligence) becomes a contradiction in terms. "What we are confronted with is the prospect of a society of laborers without labor, that is without the only activity left to them. Surely, nothing could be worse" (*HC*, p. 5).

Arendt describes a world of losses. Of course, the worst is if we lose our possibility to live on the Earth. During Arendt's lifetime, that threat primarily consisted of nuclear weapons, a threat that certainly remains. We who live here today are confronted with many more potential disasters that, together and individually, would make the