

## Arendt, Hannah (1906–75)

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### Biography

Hannah Arendt was one of the leading political thinkers of the twentieth century. She observed Nazi totalitarianism at close quarters and devoted much of her life to making sense of it. In her view it mobilized the atomized masses around a simple-minded ideology, and devised a form of rule in which bureaucratically minded officials performed murderous deeds with a clear conscience. For Arendt the only way to avoid totalitarianism was to establish a well-ordered political community that encouraged public participation and institutionalized political freedom. She considered politics to be one of the highest human activities because it enabled citizens to reflect on their collective life, to give meaning to their personal lives and to develop a creative and cohesive community. She was deeply worried that the economically obsessed modern age discouraged political activity, and created morally superficial people susceptible to the appeal of mindless adventurism.

### 1. Life

Born into a Jewish family in Königsburg, Arendt went on to study philosophy, first under Heidegger and Bultmann at Marburg and then under Husserl and Jaspers respectively at Freiburg and Heidelberg. The Nazi rise to power put paid to her academic ambitions and she became active in Jewish politics. She was arrested and detained in 1933, but was soon able to escape to France. She was briefly interned in a French prison camp, from where she escaped to the USA in 1941. She held various academic positions there, the last at the New Centre for Social Research. She regularly wrote on public issues but was not otherwise politically active.

### 2. *The Origins of Totalitarianism*

Arendt made her name with [The Origins of Totalitarianism](#) (1951), a somewhat misleading title for a book that was concerned not only with totalitarianism but also with the rise of anti-Semitism, imperialism and racism, the ‘three elements of shame’ in the modern age as she called them. She argued that Nazi and Stalinist totalitarianism represented a wholly new form of rule based on ideology and its twin terror. Ideology, the *logos* of an idea, centred around a specific idea, be it race, class or nation. It teased out the logical implications of the idea, built a tightly knit system around them, and sought to reconstruct a polity on that basis. This necessarily involved terror, by which Arendt meant a systematic, institutionalized, carefully planned and legally unrestrained use of physical and psychological violence. In Arendt’s view totalitarianism found a fertile soil in an environment in which society had been dissolved into loose and rootless masses and the hollowed out state had been reduced to an unrestrained coercive apparatus. For her, totalitarianism, born out of the rejection of the ordinary world as we know it, had its paradigmatic expression in concentration camps – a mechanical, impersonal and unworldly

‘world’ utterly devoid of thinking, feeling, judgment, personal identity, privacy and all else that distinguishes human existence (see [Ideology §1](#); [Totalitarianism §2](#)).

[The Origins of Totalitarianism](#) was an important work. It offered brilliant insights into the nature and role of political institutions, the inner contradictions of the modern nation-state, and the human need for rootedness. But it also had its weaknesses. Arendt treated totalitarianism as an independent and self-subsisting phenomenon relentlessly unfolding its inner logic and subject to no human constraints. She uncritically equated the Nazi and Stalinist ‘forms’ of totalitarianism, and her analysis was underpinned by theories of man and society that were nowhere clearly stated and defended. In her subsequent writings Arendt often returned to the large philosophical questions raised by the Nazi experience but inadequately explored in [The Origins of Totalitarianism](#). She asked such questions as what it meant to be human, how we should live both individually and collectively, in what kind of world it was possible to lead a meaningful life, why human beings committed evil, how thinking was related to action, and what future modernity held in store for humankind.

### **3. The Human Condition**

Arendt first dealt systematically with some of these questions in [The Human Condition](#) (1958). She distinguished two kinds of life, the *vita activa* and the *vita contemplativa*, and concentrated on the former. For her, humans are a part of nature and subject to its necessity, but are also able to transcend it and act in a truly free and gratuitous manner. She divided human activities into labour, work and action, each presupposing but going beyond and hence higher than the preceding one. Labour referred to the familiar daily round of activities centred around the production and reproduction of life. Work referred to activities in which human beings controlled nature and interposed a durable and distinctively human world between themselves and nature. It included such things as building houses, crafts, writing books, painting pictures and composing music. Action was uniquely interpersonal and referred to activities in which human beings transcended nature, interacted with others, began something new, and made a distinct mark on the world. Action, the unique expression of the human capacities for freedom and transcendence, was a distinctively human achievement; it included such things as speaking, arguing, persuading, taking initiatives, standing up for a cause and protesting against an evil.

Although action occurred in all areas of life, Arendt argued that politics was its ideal home. The political life provided such necessary preconditions of action as a plurality of participants, publicity, public space, shared interests, the inspiring tradition of action and the possibility of immortal fame. By challenging people to ‘dare the extraordinary’ and leave behind an inspiring story that gave meaning to their existence and raised the level of communal life, the political community, a community living together in the mode of acting and speaking, realized the full potential of human existence. For Arendt this was why man was by nature a political ‘animal’.

For Arendt the classical world of Athens and Rome respected the hierarchy of the *vita activa* and nurtured a climate conducive to action, freedom and meaningfulness. The late middle and early modern ages gave the pride of place to work, and admired the craftsman. Modernity reversed the hierarchy and was centred around labour. It was distinguished by such features as an excessive

preoccupation with life and its endless wants, a subjectivist morality, the loss of stable structures, the deterministic and process-like character of human existence and the reduction of government to administration. Since modernity did not nurture the necessary climate for action, people in the modern world lacked the opportunity to give meaning to their lives, and either led meaningless lives or sought a pseudo-meaning in following the allegedly objective laws of history.

#### 4. Later works

After [The Human Condition](#) Arendt wrote several books, all containing stimulating insights but lacking in philosophical rigour and penetration and none matching its imaginative power. In 1961 she published [Between Past and Future](#), a collection of six essays of varying quality. She explored the nature of political authority, freedom, political judgment and culture in greater detail than before, and showed her growing sympathy for Kant. She insisted that political thinking was public and representative in character and involved looking at a subject from a variety of different standpoints. The greater its range and imaginative sympathy, the more representative and valid was the resulting opinion or judgment.

In 1963 Arendt published [On Revolution](#), bubbling with suggestive but sketchily explored ideas and showing signs of hurry. She argued that revolution, one of the highest forms of political action, was modern in origin and aimed to establish a secure framework of freedom. Since it was political in character, it succeeded in the USA where it did not overstep its limits, and failed in France where the revolution of 1789 was subverted by concern over the problem of poverty. In her view even the American Revolution was only a partial success. By failing to give a constitutional status to local assemblies and town hall meetings, it discouraged active political participation and the development of public spirit. Thanks to several factors, including the enormous influence of Karl Marx, the greatest theorist of revolution, it was not the American but the French Revolution that became the model of all subsequent revolutions, including the Russian revolution of 1917. For Arendt, they were all doomed from the start. She pleaded for a fuller appreciation of the 'lost treasures' of the revolutionary tradition, especially its concern to set up a participatory polity constructed from the bottom upwards (see [Revolution §2](#)).

In 1963 Arendt also published [Eichmann in Jerusalem](#) based on the Israeli trial of a prominent Nazi. Eichmann was a Nazi officer who dutifully carried out his superior's orders and murdered several thousand Jews in one of the German concentration camps. Modifying some of her views in the [Origins of Totalitarianism](#), she argued that Eichmann's enormous crimes proceeded not so much from wickedness as from sheer thoughtlessness. He did not personally hate the Jews, nor was he a sadist or an evil man. All he did was mechanically to carry out his bureaucratic duties out of a blind sense of loyalty to the *Führer*, without once pausing to reflect on the enormity of what he was doing. His evil had neither moral depth nor deep roots in his psyche, and lacked the power to fascinate. He was a boring, banal and morally superficial man whose evil deeds, although not done inadvertently, had no deeper meaning for him and were incidental to his murderous job. Arendt's book aroused heated controversy and made her a pariah in several Jewish and even non-Jewish circles. Her analysis was not wrong but partial. It took no account of the passionate and fiercely moralized anti-Semitism of Nazism, did not explain why Eichmann

did not think about what he was doing, and failed to explore the deeper nature and sources of evil (see [Holocaust](#)).

In the late 1960s, Arendt increasingly returned to an exploration of the *vita contemplativa* to which she had hitherto paid only cursory attention. The result was her posthumously published [The Life of the Mind](#) (1978). The work was intended to be in three volumes, devoted respectively to the analyses of the nature of and interrelations between the three basic human capacities to think, will and judge, but she managed to finish only the first two. For her the *vita contemplativa* took two forms, namely thinking and knowing, paradigmatically expressed in philosophy and science respectively. Thinking is concerned with a quest for meaning or significance, knowing with a search for truth. Science inquires into 'what is', and is motivated by a passionate love of truth, while philosophy inquires into 'what it means for it to be' and is motivated by an equally passionate love of wisdom. Science is analytical and investigative, philosophy reflective and meditative. Science offers hard conclusions, whereas philosophy is tentative and endlessly exploratory and, like Penelope's web, begins the day by unscrambling the certainties of the previous night. Science remains confined to the world, while philosophy transcends it and is a unique expression of human freedom.

Given her view of thinking, Arendt had some difficulty relating it to both willing and action. Willing was a worldly faculty involving other people, a wish to change the world, and a measure of moral certainty; by contrast, thinking was solitary, tentative and inconclusive. Arendt neither satisfactorily resolved their tension nor showed how the two were mediated. She faced a similar difficulty in relating thinking and action to philosophy and politics. She was puzzled as to why many philosophers displayed a great hostility to the politics of a free society and supported authoritarian rule. Sometimes she explained this in terms of the philosopher's inappropriate ambition to discover the truth about the world and to 'coerce' people into accepting it by the 'force' of logic. For the most part she stressed philosophy's solitary and unworldly nature which made it impatient of the plurality, unpredictability and the apparent chaos of political life. The latter view implied that the philosopher and the political community could never be at peace with each other, and that political philosophy was impossible. Arendt found the conclusion unpalatable, but could not see an alternative.

Arendt was a highly original thinker, who made substantial contributions to political philosophy. She offered a body of profound insights into the nature, structure and role of political life, developed a wholly new vocabulary, explored long-neglected dimensions of political experience, and highlighted some of the seductive but dangerous aspects of modernity. She helped sustain the tradition of political philosophy at a time when it was in a state of decline by asking new questions, offering new ways of answering old ones, and showing that a systematic political philosophy did not have to result in an elaborate system.

### **List of works**

Arendt, H. (1951) *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, New York: Harcourt Brace; 2nd edn, enlarged, 1958.

(A study of the development and operation of the Nazi and Communist systems of government.)

Arendt, H. (1958) *The Human Condition*, Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

(An examination of the nature of modernity in the light of Arendt's discussion of labour, work and action.)

Arendt, H. (1961) *Between Past and Future*, New York: Viking Press; 2nd edn, enlarged, 1968.

(A collection of essays on such subjects as freedom, authority and culture.)

Arendt, H. (1963a) *On Revolution*, New York: Viking Press.

(A critical examination of French and American revolutions.)

Arendt, H. (1963b) *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, New York: Viking Press.

(A critical analysis of the Israeli trial of Eichmann.)

Arendt, H. (1972) *Crises of the Republic*, New York: Harcourt Brace.

(A collection of essays on subjects of current political interest.)

Arendt, H. (1978) *The Life of the Mind*, New York: Harcourt Brace.

(Investigations into the nature of thinking and willing.)

Arendt, H. (1982) *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*, ed. R. Beiner, Chicago, IL: Chicago University Press.

(An incomplete study of the nature and basis of judgment.)

### **References and further reading**

Canovan, M. (1992) *Hannah Arendt: A Reinterpretation of her Political Thought*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

(A sympathetic and comprehensive study of Arendt's political thought, with an excellent bibliography. Stresses the centrality of the totalitarian experience to Arendt's thought.)

D'Entreves, M.P. (1994) *The Political Philosophy of Hannah Arendt*, London: Routledge.

(A generally sympathetic study of Arendt's political thought against the background of her critique of modernity.)

Kateb, G. (1984) *Hannah Arendt: Politics, Conscience, Evil*, Oxford: Martin Robertson.

(A critical study of Arendt's moral thought stressing the limitations of her account of evil.)

Parekh, B. (1981) *Hannah Arendt and the Search for a New Political Philosophy*, London: Macmillan.

(A detailed examination of Arendt's critique of traditional political philosophy and her attempt to construct an alternative.)

Young-Bruehl, E. (1982) Hannah Arendt: For the Love of the World, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

(A good biography of Arendt.)

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