

**THINKING AND ACTING:
AN INTRODUCTION TO HANNAH ARENDT**

SYLLABUS

I. Synopsis

Hannah Arendt (1906-1975) is one of a kind. She is often called a philosopher. But, as this extract from an interview with the journalist Günter Gaus broadcast on West German television on 28 October 1964 shows, this was a description from which she demurred:

Gaus: I consider you to be a philosopher ...

Arendt: Well, I can't help that, but in my opinion I am not. In my opinion I have said good-bye to philosophy once and for all. As you know, I studied philosophy, but that does not mean that I stayed with it.

Gaus: I should like to hear from you more precisely what the difference is between political philosophy and your work as a professor of political theory.

Arendt: The expression 'political philosophy', which I avoid, is extremely burdened by tradition. When I talk about these things, academically or nonacademically, I always mention that there is a vital tension between philosophy and politics. That is, between man as a thinking being and man as an acting being, there is a tension that does not exist in natural philosophy, for example. Like everyone else, the philosopher can be objective with regard to nature, and when he says what he thinks about it he speaks in the name of all mankind. But he cannot be objective or neutral with regard to politics. Not since Plato!¹

Whether these remarks are self-refuting – whether they precisely show her to be a philosopher (even a precise philosopher) – is something to ponder. At any rate, the tension between 'man as a thinking being and man as an acting being' gives us both the title for this tutorial course, 'Thinking and Acting', and the frame for what is, essentially, an introduction to her thought via certain key topics in five major texts.

The focus of the course is on "the connection between evil and lack of thought".² The syllabus begins and ends with Arendt's reflections on this topic in two works: (parts of) *The Life of the Mind* (Week 1) and 'Thinking and Moral Considerations' (Week 8). Since these writings repeat (with variations) the same thoughts, this means that we shall conclude by revisiting, in the light of the intervening six weeks, the thoughts that we encounter at the start. This will also mean revisiting her take on Socrates "who, in his person, unified two apparently contradictory passions, for thinking and acting".³ In between, we shall spend three weeks on portions of Part Three of *The Origins of Totalitarianism* plus *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (Weeks 2 to 4), where the question of evil is at the fore. *The Human Condition* will occupy us for the following three weeks (Weeks 5 to 7). In the Prologue Arendt says, "What I propose ... is very simple: it is nothing more than to think what we are doing."⁴ Arendt was no political

¹ In Peter Baehr (ed.), *The Portable Hannah Arendt*, London: Penguin, 2000, pp. 3-4.

² *The Life of the Mind*, p. 179.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 167.

⁴ *The Human Condition*, p. 5.

activist; thinking – an activity of the mind that never seemed to let her settle – was, in a way, what she did.

II. Preparation

If you have the time over the break, try reading one of the short books on Arendt in the bibliography below – either Swift or Fry. On the development of her political thought, see the introduction by Dana Villa to *The Cambridge Companion to Hannah Arendt*. The same book includes a chronology of her life and work. All of this is by way of both overview and background. But the best introduction is to make some forays into the primary sources we are using (see below). This will give you a flavour of her thinking and help prepare you for the fast and unrelenting pace of the eight-week term. (See also the readings on the assignment sheet for the essay for Week 1.)

III. Procedure

Each week I shall give you an assignment sheet with an essay question, guidelines and readings. Your essay should be double-spaced, using a standard font (such as Times New Roman 12 point), and about two thousand words long. Please paginate. The tutorial will revolve around your essay, so it is vital that you and I each have our own copy. It is better if I can read your essay in advance. As I live in London and shall be taking the train to Oxford on the day we meet (Thursday), try to send me a copy by email as a Word or PDF attachment by 10:00 a.m. that day. Failing this, please bring your essay to the tutorial. Either way, be prepared to read the essay aloud in the tutorial.

V. Sources

The main primary sources, in the order in which we shall use them, are:

- *The Life of the Mind* [1978], New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978 (one-volume edition, published posthumously)
- *The Origins of Totalitarianism* [1951], San Diego: Harcourt, 1973
- *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* [1963], New York: Penguin, 1994
- *The Human Condition* [1958], Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998
- 'Thinking and Moral Considerations' [1971] in *Responsibility and Judgment* (ed. Jerome Kohn), New York: Schocken Books, 2003

There are numerous books on Arendt's thought, either as a whole or on specific topics or controversies. (She was a controversial figure and involved in several quite heated public debates.) Here are a handful of secondary sources. For more, see Fry, Swift and the bibliography in *The Cambridge Companion to Hannah Arendt*.

- Elisabeth Young-Bruehl, *Hannah Arendt: For Love of the World*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004 [500 pages plus, the standard biography]
- Karin A. Fry, *Arendt: A Guide for the Perplexed*, London: Continuum, 2009
- Simon Swift, *Hannah Arendt*, London: Routledge 2009 (Critical Thinkers series)

- Margaret Canovan, *Hannah Arendt: A Reinterpretation of her Political Thought*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992
- Richard J. Bernstein, *Radical Evil: A Philosophical Interrogation*, Cambridge, MA: Polity Press, 2002
- Dana R. Villa, *Politics, Philosophy, Terror: Essays on the Thought of Hannah Arendt*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009
- Dana Villa (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Hannah Arendt*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000
- Larry May & Jerome Kohn (eds.), *Hannah Arendt: Twenty Years Later*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1997

V. Schedule (with main primary sources)

Week 1: “the connection between evil and lack of thought”

The Life of the Mind: Introduction; Part One, chap. 3, sections 17 (‘The answer of Socrates’) and 18 (‘The two-in-one’)

Week 2: totalitarianism and propaganda

The Origins of Totalitarianism: Part Three, esp. chap. 11, sect. 1

Week 3: on radical evil

The Origins of Totalitarianism: Part Three, esp. chap. 12, sect. 3

Week 4: from radical to banal

Eichmann in Jerusalem: esp. chaps. 1, 3, 6, 7, 15 and Postscript

Week 5: the private and the public

The Human Condition: Prologue; parts I and II

Week 6: speech and action

The Human Condition: Part V

Week 7: modernity and alienation

The Human Condition: Part VI

Week 8: “the connection between evil and lack of thought” – again

‘Thinking and Moral Considerations’ in *Responsibility and Judgment*

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