

**MAN'S POWER IN BOUNDLESS SPACE.
A THEOLOGICAL READING OF
HANNAH ARENDT'S CONCEPTION OF *PRAXIS***

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Abstract. *The paper aims at exploring the issue of praxis from "The Human Condition" by Hannah Arendt. It proposes a theological reading of this concept. It argues that her assessment of action (praxis) suffers serious deficiencies due to the divorce of human condition from human nature and the neglect of the latter. The issue of human nature is crucial as long as the human condition is not only about rational acts but irrationality as well. It might be well argued that for the ancient Greek times the human condition was enough to think a proper vita activa, but as long as the City-state is no longer in place one should refer differently to the human condition. One way to look at it is to consider the issue of human nature too. Therefore, a theological contribution to the matter is desirable.*

Keywords: *Human Condition, human nature, praxis, action.*

There are at least two biographical details that shed an important light upon the subject that I am going to elaborate on in this paper. The first one is Hannah Arendt's intellectual indebtedness to Martin Heidegger, Karl Jaspers, Rudolf Bultmann, Edmund Husserl. The second one is her teaching on Immanuel Kant which was issued in a series of papers published posthumously¹. Nonetheless, a third detail might be offered: her doctoral dissertation on the concept of love in Saint Augustine. Departing from these biographical directions we are able to deduce that Hannah Arendt (1906-1975) belongs to the strong wave of existentialism as it was configured in the first half of the 20th century by the writings of Heidegger and Jaspers. At the same time, the existentialism that she purports is not simply the reaction to or even denial of essentialism as it culminated with Hegelianism. As a student of Kant, Arendt could not simply eliminate the space of essences or, to put it in Kantian terms, the *Ding an Sich*. The point in this case rests on two main tasks

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¹ Hannah Arendt, *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy* (ed. Ronald Beiner), University of Chicago Press, 1989.

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that the paper assumes: to see whether she kept the balance between existence and essence, between human condition and human nature and, finally, which are the implications of her success or failure².

The best work which translates her philosophical views is “The Human Condition”. I will try to answer that twofold question by focusing on this book. Whereas “The Human Condition” is the most philosophical of Hannah Arendt’s books, it is not the work that made her famous. What is not very common among many authors, Arendt became famous with “Origins of Totalitarianism” (1951), her very first book. One could explain this situation by saying that the “Origins of Totalitarianism” concentrates a series of views that her later works will attempt to elaborate and ground philosophically³. The mere fact that “The Human Condition” had been first published after “Origins of Totalitarianism”, although seven years later, indicates that here one should find many answers to challenging questions that stimulated the polemical debate around the “Origins of Totalitarianism”. For example, some commentators find in “The Human Condition” the explanation of the tendency to self-destruction that modern society shows, as it was recorded in the “Origins of Totalitarianism”⁴. Nevertheless, “The Human Condition” and all other works (“Between Past and Future”, 1961; “On Revolution”, 1963; “Crises of the Republic”, 1972; the unfinished “The Life of the Mind”, 1978) may be read independently of “Origins of Totalitarianism”. As long as Hannah Arendt is difficult to classify as thinker in the categories of political theory—although she seems to have some obvious sympathy towards republicanism in the tradition leading from Machiavelli to Tocqueville⁵—, then it is recommended to read these works on their own.

In this paper I will explore the issue of *praxis* in “The Human Condition” (by this term I understand not only action *per se*, but also speech – which according to Arendt are the two main components of action). The way that I will do this is through a theological reading of it. The differentiation of human condition from human nature is a step that she assumes. At the same time she assumes her silence about the human nature. My argument is that her assessment of action (*praxis*) suffers serious deficiencies due to the break between human condition and human nature. These deficiencies are easier to point out from a theological point of view. If human

² The ongoing debate on these issues is however intense. See, for example: Backman, J., “The End of Action: An Arendtian Critique of Aristotle’s Concept of praxis”, *Collegium: Studies Across Disciplines in the Humanities and Social Sciences*, 8, 2010, pp. 28-47. Parvikko, Tuija, “Committed to think, judge and act: Hannah Arendt’s ideal-typical approach to human faculties”, in Joke J. Hermesen & Dana Richard Villa (eds.), *The Judge and the Spectator: Hannah Arendt’s Political Philosophy*, Peeters, 1999. Suchting, W. A., “Marx and Hannah Arendt’s the human condition”, in *Ethics* 73 (1), 1962, pp. 47-55. Taminiaux, Jacques, “Bios politikos and bios theoretikos in the phenomenology of Hannah Arendt”, in *International Journal of Philosophical Studies* 4 (2), 1996, pp. 215-232. Tsao, Roy T., “Arendt against Athens: Rereading the Human Condition”, *Political Theory* 30 (1), 2002, pp. 97-123. (I thank an anonymous reviewer of a previous draft for these reading suggestions).

³ BRC, “Hannah Arendt” in *The Blackwell Encyclopedia of Political Science* (ed. Vernon Bogdanon), Blackwell, Cambridge, 1991, p. 29.

⁴ Denis Huisman, *Dictionar de opere majore ale filosofiei*, Ed. Enciclopedică, Bucharest, 2001, p. 63.

⁵ David Miller (ed), *Enciclopedia Blackwell a gândirii politice* (trad. Dragan Stoianovici), Humanitas, Bucharest, 2000, p. 36.

condition answers the question “What?”, human nature answers the question “Why?”. Therefore, it seems to me that she misunderstands human nature in her decision to ignore it as part of the reflection upon *praxis*. However, the power to forgive and the power of promise that are meant to overcome the shortcomings of action could be seen as the expressions of the human nature. A close consideration of human nature into the description of the human condition would not change the theoretical description she makes. Instead, it might change the conclusions in the sense of giving more weight to her solutions to the political problems that she tries to investigate. Hannah Arendt, the former doctoral student of Augustine, takes an important step further from mere positivist descriptions of public life (in the spirit of the Vienna Circle) towards a daring incorporation of metaphysical concerns (not to speak about the perspective of considering the divine revelation as having epistemological value).

Besides introduction and conclusions, the paper is structured in two main parts. The first one will define the concept of human condition. The second will overview and critically read the issue of *praxis*. Before moving forward to the first section of this presentation, let me say something about the book itself. Technically, the book⁶ is organized in six chapters, as follows: “The Human Condition”, “The Public and the Private Realm”, “Labor”, “Work”, “Action”, and finally “The Vita Activa and the Modern Age”. The main conditions that define modern man are labor, work and action which are worked out by Hannah Arendt in the third, fourth and, respectively, fifth section. Whereas one shall read independently of the whole these main characteristics of the human condition, it is highly recommended that each should be read alongside with the introductory part that is the first two sections (“The Human Condition”, “The Public and the Private Realm”). To put simply, whether we read “Labor”, “Work”, or “Action”, no one should skip the introductory two sections.

Defining the Human Condition

Central to our purpose is the first section. In here one gets a valuable insight into what the human condition is, starting from three levels: “Vita activa and the Human Condition”, “The Term Vita Activa” and “Eternity versus Immortality”. Arendt seems to indicate that there are two ways to outline the human condition. The first way is in the relation with *vita activa*. She deliberately neglects *vita contemplativa* that along with *vita activa* sets up the human condition. *Vita contemplativa* was meant to be approached in a different book, a project that she started and remained unfinished (currently published as “The Life of the Mind”). Under *vita activa*, she “designates three fundamental human activities: labor, work, and action. They are fundamental because each corresponds to one of the basic conditions under which life on earth has been given to man”⁷. One should

⁶ Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, The University of Chicago Press, 1958.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

notice here the passive diathesis: *“life on earth as been given to man”*. There are some hints in her book that allow us to read it in a traditional creationist framework, a fact which actually justifies our theological assessment of it. Besides this, it speaks that these activities have sense only on earth, therefore they are contingent. She admits that there is a human nature which constitutes the essence of human being, irrespective of the particular conditions of its life.

The collocation *“life on earth”* must be understood in mainly two senses. One is announced from the “Prologue” to the book: the Earth is the very core of the human condition. Even if the human being leaves the Earth for the Universe, he will bring along the abilities and knowledge that he got on Earth. Taking this introductory statement seriously, one might correctly deduce that the very premise of the book was a scientific event and not the political debate that was fueled with “The Origins of Totalitarianism”. In 1957, that is just one year before publishing the book, *“an earth-born object made by man was launched into the universe, where for some weeks it circled the earth according to the same laws of gravitation that swing and keep in motion the celestial bodies – the sun, the moon, and the stars”*⁸. This is a scientific event that, in Arendt’s reasoning, has got important political implications because it reflects man’s enthusiasm to overcome his condition through an artificial world. A second understanding of collocation is that *“the life on earth”* designates the medium which makes sense of the *“three fundamental human activities: labor, work, and action”*. If the human condition as *vita activa* is defined by labor, work and action, then life or human existence is defined by birth and death: *“All three activities and their corresponding conditions are intimately connected with the most general condition of human existence: birth and death, natality and mortality”*⁹. Labor, work and action as elements of the human condition are defined in relation to life or human existence: labor *“assures not only individual survival, but the life of the species”*; work *“bestows a measure of permanence and durability upon the futility of mortal life and the fleeting character of human time”*; action *“create[s] the condition for remembrance, that is, for history”*. All three *“are rooted in natality in so far as they have the task to provide and preserve the world for, to foresee and reckon with, the constant influx of newcomers who are born into the world as strangers”*¹⁰. The relation between life and the human condition can be summarized as follows: *“Whatever enters the human world of its own accord or is drawn into it by human effort becomes part of the human condition”*¹¹. As long as the human condition is inescapable, its components (labor, work, action) are inevitable too. This statement rather justifies the attention that Arendt draws upon action as the most characteristic feature of human activity. Here it is important to note that the elements of the human condition are organized hierarchically on a scale according to which labor is the lowest and action (praxis) – the highest.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 1.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

The second way to understand human condition is in relation with human nature. Arendt is very cautious in saying that “*the human condition is not the same as human nature, and the sum total of human activities and capabilities which correspond to the human condition does not constitute anything like human nature*”¹². Whereas human condition relates to existence or phenomena, human nature points out essence. Seemingly, there are two reasons why one should keep silence on the issue of human nature. Important to note is that the silence I am referring to here does not imply denial. On this matter, Arendt is perhaps more Kantian than ever: “The thing in itself” exists, but nobody is able to talk about it. But contrary to Kant – and this is a very important remark – Arendt does not appear to acknowledge that human nature determines in any way the human condition. As I will show later, the uncompromising rupture between human nature and human condition severely weakens her description of *praxis*. In a way, we might understand this silence as an attempt to escape the “Achilles’ heel” in Kantian talk upon the *Ding an sich*: if it is unknowable, how can he say that it exists? Saying that it exists is not a way to pretend that we know something, even though minimal, about it? Coming back to Arendt on human nature, she claims two reasons why we are not able to refer to it. Man’s contingency makes it impossible for him to describe human nature: “*It is highly unlikely that we, who can know, determine, and define the natural essences of all things surrounding us, which we are not, should ever be able to do the same for ourselves – this would be like jumping over our own shadows*”. What is most striking is her statement that “[...] *nothing entitles us to assume that man has a nature or essence in the same sense as other things*”¹³. To put in one sentence the two ideas above, if we have no arguments to pretend that we share the same nature as the things we know, then we are entitled to extrapolate the nature of the things we cognate to ourselves. But is there any reason to pretend that a thing that we “*know, determine, and define*” has got a nature? One can hardly reply to this question departing from Arendt’s text simply because she doesn’t address what human nature is, but only why we cannot know the human nature. The first hint to a possible definition of human nature goes as essence: “[...] *essential characteristics of human existence in the sense that without them this existence would no longer be human*”¹⁴. The second hint goes in a more subtle way: “the problem of human nature, the Augustinian *quaestio mihi factus sum* (a question have I become for myself)”. It looks like saying that human nature is what we know about ourselves, that is human nature as an open question with regard to ourselves. We are not able to know it as we know other things’ nature because “Who” cannot turn into a “What”: “[...] *if we have a nature or essence, then surely only a god could know and define it, and the first prerequisite would be that he be able to speak about a «who» as though it were a «what»*”¹⁵. In the second endnote to this chapter of the book

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 11.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 11-12.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

she explains better this statement: “*In brief, the answer to the question «Who am I?» is simply: «You are a man – whatever that may be»; and the answer to the question «What am I?» can be given only by God who made man. The question about the nature of man is no less a theological question than the question about the nature of God; both can be settled only within the framework of a divinely revealed answer*”¹⁶. Before making some remarks on this issue, one cannot refrain from asking: how would Arendt reconcile the ancient-Greek spirit that she recasts approvingly in her assessment of *polis* and *praxis* with the legacy of “Know yourself?” As long as human nature looks more like a matter of personal introspection, what was the signification of self-knowledge for the free citizen? Does Arendt make a too phenomenological reading of *polis* ignoring other aspects of it such as self-introspection? Coming back to the issue, it is clear that Arendt rejects the issue of revelation. In her report there are two details and one is inaccurate. It is true that the problem of human nature is better solved through revelation, especially the one that is recorded in the Bible (of maximum relevance are the first chapter of Genesis and the fifth and seventh chapters of the Epistle to the Romans). But it is untrue that the nature of God can be settled through revelation. Christian theology denied that the divine nature can be known in either way. It is true that within Christian theology there are two theologies: negative and affirmative. The negative or apophatic theology acknowledges that “God surpasses human predication”. As God “[...] transcends both affirmation and negation, he is to be attained ultimately not in intellectual contemplation, but in an ecstasies of love, where union with God, ‘deification’, takes place in ‘unknowing’”¹⁷. Opposing this view, cataphatic or positive theology¹⁸ “states what can be affirmatively predicated of God”¹⁹. But none of these streams of theology should be seen as attempts to know the nature of God, which is completely inaccessible to man. Only rational philosophy or metaphysics (which is not theology!) from Descartes to Leibniz attempted to explore the nature of God, a venture that was severely cut off by Immanuel Kant in the “Critique of Pure Reason”. Since then few had taken seriously this project. Thus, I have shown that Arendt was mistaken in her assertion that “*The question about the nature of man is no less a theological question than the question about the nature of God; both can be settled only within the framework of a divinely revealed answer*”. Does it imply that we can know at least partially the human nature considering that in front of God everything is creation? I have already pointed out one argument that justifies a reading of Arendt’s “Human Condition” within a creationist framework. This legitimates the reading of the Bible, especially the Genesis, not only as a revealed cosmology, but at least as the most comprehensive hypothesis about the origins of earthly life. Then why not considering the data produced there in the evaluation of man as concurrently having nature and condition?

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 302.

¹⁷ Alan Richardson (Ed), *A Dictionary of Christian Theology*, SCM Press Ltd, 1972, p. 96.

¹⁸ On both theologies see Dionysius the Pseudo-Areopagite, *The Mystical Theology and the Celestial Hierarchies*, Shrine of Wisdom, 1949.

¹⁹ Alan Richardson, *op. cit.*, p. 96.

Arendt's Conception of Praxis. A Theological Reading

The important feature of action that I am going to develop in the following lines might indirectly have a word to say about human nature. This seems obvious from the first section of the fifth chapter that is devoted to "Action". Action as the third fundamental activity of the human being has two aspects: speech (*lexis*) and action (*praxis*). The key sentence reads as follows: "*Action and speech are so closely related because the primordial and specifically human act must at the same time contain the answer to the question asked of every newcomer: «Who are you?» This disclosure of who somebody is, is implicit in both his words and his deeds*"²⁰. However striking this might sound, Arendt seems to acknowledge the possibility of unveiling human nature through action. However, the enthusiasm is cooled down when one reads the following passage: "*In acting and speaking, men show who they are, reveal actively their unique personal identities and thus make their appearance in the human world, while their physical identities appear without any activity of their own in the unique shape of the body and sound of the voice*"²¹. What Arendt suggests here is that through action we understand the individuality and not the nature, or, to put it in theological terms, we notice the person (*hypostasis*) or what is unique and not substance (*ousia*) which is common. Therefore, far from being essentialist, Hannah Arendt's conception represents a blend of existentialism and personalism. Paradoxically enough, while one can notice the disclosure of a person through action and speech, nobody can communicate this understanding: "*The manifestation of who the speaker and doer unexchangeably is, though it is plainly visible, retains a curious intangibility that confounds all efforts toward unequivocal verbal expression. The moment we want to say who somebody is, our very vocabulary leads us astray into saying what he is; we get entangled in a description of qualities he necessarily shares with others like him; we begin to describe a type or a «character» in the old meaning of the word, with the result that his specific uniqueness escapes us*"²². There are some questions raised by this statement. Acknowledging that action reveals "who is" whereas the description of that action shows "what is the one that acted", does not seem to contradict the affirmation from the very beginning which reads as follows "[...] *the first prerequisite would be that he be able to speak about a «who» as though it were a «what»*"? If it is not a matter of contradiction, then one should deduce that what looks like being common to some people (if not all) it is not their essential characteristics. Hence, through the question "What?" we are in a position to understand both common characteristics and essential characteristics. One peculiar feature that a huge amount of thinkers attribute to human nature is the propensity to evil. On this issue, there is a slight difference of accent in the story of Genesis and the one of Paul. For instance, the propensity to evil is recorded in Genesis as a matter of willingness which defines the human nature (3: 1-9). Apostle Paul in his epistle to the inhabitants of Rome

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 158.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 159.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 161.

instead starts from a phenomenological perspective, or from concrete to the essence irrespective of any revealed information: *"For that which I do, I allow not: for what I would, that do I not; but what I hate, that do I. / If then I do that which I would not, I consent unto the law that it is good. / Now then it is no more I that do it, but sin that dwelleth in me. / For I know that in me (that is, in my flesh) dwelleth no good thing: for to will is present with me; but how to perform that which is good I find not. / For the good that I would, I do not: but the evil which I would not, that I do. / Now if I do that I would not, it is no more I that do it, but sin that dwelleth in me"*²³ (Romans 7, 15-20). Therefore he seems to conclude on essence in an inductive manner that is from the common manifestations of man. As long as the reasoning is not deficient, then one does not necessarily need revelation in order to have a grasp on human nature. On the condition that the divine revelation does not say the contrary, then common characteristics intimate something about essence. Therefore, it would be more accurate for Arendt to claim that in the absence of revelation, frequent manifestations of man highlight the human nature. Nevertheless, it remains an open question why the personal identity (as differentiated from common nature) which is disclosed through action cannot be communicated, but only imitated mimetically in her actions: *"[...] whereas the intangible identities of the agents in the story, since they escape all generalization and therefore all reification, can be conveyed only through an imitation of their acting. This is also why the theater is the political art par excellence"*²⁴.

So far, I have shown that action reveals the identity of a person. At the same time every action that is taken by a human being has by its very nature unforeseen consequences. Both attributes of action are interrelated: *"This unpredictability of outcome is closely related to the revelatory character of action and speech, in which one discloses one's self without ever either knowing himself or being able to calculate beforehand whom he reveals"*²⁵. Here Arendt raises the question of a personal identity that becomes manifest and hence communicable only after death. The point was already anticipated in the previous section when she seemed to say that the meaning of an action becomes part of an identity and both get prominence when the life is over: *"[...] its full meaning can reveal itself only when it has ended. [...] the light that illuminates processes of action, and therefore all historical processes, appears only at their end, frequently when all the participants are dead"*²⁶. What shall be the name of these processes that is revealed in meaning and personal identity? Is that the nature that we observe *post-factum*? Let us read the following fragment: *"This unchangeable identity of the person, though disclosing itself intangibly in the act and speech, becomes tangible only in the story of the actor's and speaker's life; but as such it can be known, that is, grasped*

²³ The King James Bible. The Revised Standard Versions (RSV) is more poignant: "I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate" (Romans, 7, 15). See *Revised Standard Version of the Bible*, Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America, 1946.

²⁴ Arendt, p. 167.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 171.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 171.

as palpable entity only after it has come to its end. In other words, human essence – not human nature in general (which does not exist) nor the sum total of qualities and shortcomings in the individual, but the essence of who somebody is – can come into being only when life departs, leaving behind nothing but a story”²⁷. It troubles many things that have been said so far. First of all, it has used interchangeably the words essence and nature, both stemming from the Greek *ousia*. By this quotation, Arendt says that human essence is one thing and human nature something else. The first comes to light after death, the second does not exist. Secondly, whereas she said at the beginning that we cannot know human nature (agnostic perspective), she appears here to deny it (negative perspective). But is this essence that becomes evident after death the same thing as the identity that is revealed through action while alive? On this issue, Arendt who otherwise proves so careful to distinguish between concepts, is elusive.

To the problems raised by action (e. g. unpredictability, futility, intangibility), the Greeks invented *polis* as solution: “[...] men’s life together in the form of the polis seemed to assure that the most futile of human activities, action and speech, and the last tangible and most ephemeral of man-made «products», the deeds and stories which are their outcome, would become imperishable”²⁸. But the polis as historical moment and organized space had been over since Pericles. In polis Arendt perceived the intrinsic power of action which is the ability to create a “space of appearance” as a boundless space: “[...] action and speech create a space between the participants which can find its proper location almost any time and anywhere”. And here goes the definition “[...] the space where I appear to others as others appear to me, where men exist not merely like other living or inanimate things but make their appearance explicitly”²⁹.

Acknowledging the polis as a historical solution even though through action as its inner core most dimensions can duplicate in other historical contexts under the shape of the “space of appearances”, Arendt seems to make it a contingent solution (read a historical condition). If polis turns out to be a solution to the frailties of the human condition, then why does she choose to speak extensively in the last account of “action” about man’s powers, namely the power to forgive and the power of promise? These two powers are also meant to overcome the shortcomings of action but the biggest difference lies in the relation with human being: while polis is external to man, forgiveness and promise are internal to him. Forgiveness releases man from the uncontrollable consequences of man’s actions. It is therefore directed towards the past in order to make possible the present: “Without being forgiven, released from the consequences of what we have done, our capacity to act would, as it were, be confined to one single deed from which we could never recover; we would remain the victims of its consequences forever”³⁰. To make a promise and to keep it redeems man’s action from the unforeseen which has a double nature: the permanent state of change in men’s

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 171.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 176.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 177.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 190.

behavior and the impossibility to predict the consequences of an action. Whereas promise can take the legal form of a contract or covenant, forgiveness represents an act of human will. Its only ruler is the individual consciousness. Having briefly outlined the importance of promise and especially forgiveness in man's public life, which is defined by action, shall we ask whether forgiveness that stems from will and it is regulated by consciousness it is not a matter of human nature?

Conclusions

The presentation of action in the conception of Hannah Arendt that I have done so far didn't take into consideration many other characteristics and nuances. My focus was on the issue of human condition and human nature and how the problems put by action could reveal what Arendt seems to deny: the human nature. Since action needs plurality that is living-together, man recovers his highest potential as human being through acting and speaking. But this fundamental activity as part of his human condition advances a lot of problems such as: futility, unpredictability, and so on. The ancient Greek solution was the city-state. Although it disappeared under many unfriendly historical conditions (such as the ascension of the empire), it has survived over the course of history under the "space of appearances" that is a boundless space. In these conditions, the polis can no longer guarantee the side-effects of action. Therefore man needs something more and at the same time something unique to him, both being related to action and speech – and these are the power to forgive and respectively the power of promise. But is not this the most striking argument in favor of human nature? If one looks closely, the answer turns out to be affirmative.

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