

Week 9: Hannah Arendt (1906 - 1975)

Hannah Arendt was University Professor in Philosophy at The New School's Graduate Faculty. Arendt, who was Jewish, escaped Nazi Germany and was interned in France as an alien. She gained her freedom from the French internment camp France and came to America where she developed her analyses of the character of Totalitarianism and of the human condition. The "human condition" refers to the *world* we have made, unlike the *environment* of other animals, which they find themselves in.

Totalitarianism: Two key ideas:

1. The rule from within: my own experience becomes what the regime says it is; I lose my subjectivity, or awareness of my perspective. If the regime calls me a traitor, I must be a traitor. We do not think for ourselves, but repeat what is thought for us by the norms of the regime.
2. I become a body only: my life as an agent, my social and political character, is erased. I can then be eliminated without the loss of anyone in particular.

The Ideal: We embrace a world shared with others: we are *interdependent* and *intersubjective*. We think with ourselves, though self-reflection and self-questioning and also, with others. Conversation is an open exchange of views; there is no such thing as *solutions* to conversations, no goals other than to express ourselves and understand others. Pluralism is the ground for human flourishing.

The Reality: The current era of mass production and a lack of respect for unique perspectives threatens to reduce us to "cogs in the machine", anonymous and interchangeable. Thinking is replaced with the mass production of accepted facts and opinions.

A strong civic culture depends on sharing ideas and being open to being changed by other perspectives. This is necessary (if not sufficient) for resisting totalitarianism. We are born as unique beings, defined by our *nativity* rather than our *mortality*. This uniqueness needs to be *celebrated*, not *dreaded* (in the sense of fearing it and feeling burdened by it).

ADOLF EICHMANN TRIAL

No Satanic evil.... Ordinary people, not monsters.

This section should be discussed in light of the In Our Time podcast on Arendt.

Banality of Evil: it isn't that evil is normalized, it is that it arises from a refusal to question. Thoughtlessness is the basis for acts that may turn out to be evil.

The conditions are still present and we need to keep thinking as the only possible form of resistance.

CONTROVERSIES

Arendt is criticised heavily for her assessment of Eichmann as "banal". (See Going Further roundtable podcast).

She is also criticised for her arguments against desegregation through busing: Arendt was against the use of students as *means rather than ends* in themselves. (From what we know, the busing of students was embraced by the students themselves).

Arendt argued that changing laws against interracial marriage should be the first step. (see Going Further for more on this)

NEXT WEEK:

There is no reading for next week. Instead, please work on a 5 minute presentation of a philosopher or idea from the course that interested you. I will present an overview of the themes, similarities and differences between the philosophers we have studied. There will also be space made for any presentations of your own work. Please email me about your choices so I can prepare the format for the class.