

2 Self-transcendence

Hannah Arendt

Hannah Arendt's books *The Human Condition* (1998) and *The Life of the Mind* (1978) may need to be read together in order to explore the philosophical anthropology that she never planned to write nor developed in full. Yet Arendt begins the former text, which was first published in 1958, with a claim that allows for her reflections to be read as a general anthropology. The goal there, she says, was to offer an analysis of those 'general human capacities which grew out of the human condition and are permanent, that is, which cannot be irretrievably lost so long as the human condition itself is not changed' (1998: 6). Arendt makes it immediately clear that she will not be discussing the human condition as a whole but only the so-called *vita activa* in its three fundamental moments: *labour* (the natural reproduction of life itself), *work* (the fabrication of material objects in the world) and *action* (human renewal understood as freedom). First published in 1971, *The Life of the Mind* supplements the first part of Arendt's philosophical anthropology by looking, inwardly, into the *vita contemplativa*. As we know, this book was also meant to have three sections on *thinking* (reason's internal dialogue that fulfils no outward purpose), *willing* (freedom as an act of volition) and *judging* (the ability to tell right from wrong, beautiful from ugly). But the project remained unfulfilled: only the first section on thinking is fully developed and the third one on judging is missing altogether.¹

Arendt's idea of the human condition requires that humans position themselves as partly similar to, but also partly distinct from, animals and other living beings in the natural world. As we put both books together, they construe a philosophical anthropology because she seeks to define the general properties through which humans construe the world they inhabit. Labour, work and action on the side of active life, thinking,

¹ See Robert Fine (2008, 2014) for an account of the importance of triadic thinking throughout Arendt's oeuvre and a general assessment of Arendt's *Life of the Mind*. See also Heller (1991b) for an attempt to connect the three faculties of the *vita activa* – labour, work and action – and those of the *vita contemplativa* – thinking, willing and judging.

willing and judging on the side of contemplative life, are all understood as equally constitutive of the ways in which humans engage with the world, other human beings and themselves. These anthropological capacities do not change historically and lay the foundations for a universalistic principle of humanity: these are properties that belong to the species as a whole in all times and places. Yet the very idea of the human condition seeks to emphasise that they are actualised, historically, in numerous different ways: it is not only that, as an *idea* that Arendt borrows from Heidegger, the human condition cannot but be historical. The notion of the human condition was meant to offer a way out of the essentialist implications of using ideas of human *nature*. The rise of modernity in particular changes the ways in which these human capacities have been actualised. As institutional contexts are transformed, the same can be said about the challenges each one of these faces and also about the tensions in their interrelationships. But our essential human features do not change, none of them disappears and there are no *new* properties to be included: as the human condition changes historically, its foundational anthropological features remain the same.

I

A common theme running through both books is that of the relationships between humans and the world. On the side of the *vita activa*, the key question is to understand how a human life is constituted through its various connections with an *exterior* environment. Human life takes place in a world that, while subject to human influence and transformation, is never a purely human environment. Arendt's conception of the world is articulated through the *natural* environment (labour), the *material* environment of objects (work) and the *sociocultural* environment of institutions and interactions (action and speech). On the side of the *vita contemplativa*, Arendt focuses on our human ability to momentarily *withdraw* from all these three worlds and thus *transcend* their limits: the human capacity to suspend our metabolic, material and indeed social constraints and then open ourselves to reflection, imagination and thinking. A key insight that I seek to reconstruct in this chapter is what I call Arendt's idea of self-transcendence: 'the paradoxical condition of a living being that, though itself part of the world of appearances, is in possession of a faculty, the ability to think, that permits the mind to *withdraw from the world without ever being able to leave it or transcend it*' (1978 I: 45 my italics). This, I contend, is her fundamental contribution to our understanding of the irreducible human powers that shape the human condition. While self-transcendence is primarily related to the

activity of thinking, the very act of displacement that it requires can only be fully understood as we reconstruct it also in terms of its relationship to the external world. The *human* world that is thus created is unique because humans see and recognise each other as part of an environment that is partly independent and exterior to us but is also partly dependent on human action itself. All living species have a world of their own (1978 I: 20) and Arendt's idea of self-transcendence is the strictly *human* quality that humans possess as they mentally transcend their particular socio-historical coordinates.² If this is the case, then creatures who do not have a bodily constitution, e.g. gods and angels, would have no *need* for self-transcendence; while creatures that depend more directly on their metabolic needs, like animals and plants, would also be unsuitable for self-transcendence.³

As *animal laborans*, then, humans engage with the natural world through the prism of their organic and metabolic necessity; through labour, the fruit of human toil is above all the continuation of life itself. As *homo faber*, humans engage instrumentally with nature and with others in order to fabricate a new, different world that is now to be populated by objects. This world of things is teleologically organised as the result of human projects – objects themselves are always designed with a purpose – but given the materiality of objects and the unintended consequences of their use, the world thus constituted remains unequivocally external and indeed irreducible to humans themselves. As *active beings*, finally, humans live in a world that Arendt describes as plural because it is always already populated not only by other human beings but also by cultural traditions and institutional practices: this is also the life-world into which we grow 'naturally' and that, depending on the familiarity of particular experiences, we may also feel as extremely alien. Its existence is accredited not through its materiality but through the presence, actions and expectations of other human beings. Temporality is then a central feature of the *vita activa*: the *linear and relatively short* movement from birth to death that organises the life of an individual is immersed in the much larger duration

² In Imre Kertész's novel *Fateless*, the main character speaks about the use of one's imagination and the experience of boredom as the two main forms of self-transcendence that remain available to human beings even under the extreme conditions of concentration camps (2006: 119 and 155–6).

³ This idea of 'the world' as the totality of possible (interior and exterior) experiences is one of the aspects in which Arendt's thinking is in continuity with, for instance, those of Heidegger (2005: 1–10) and Husserl (1931). But in Husserl and Heidegger it was essential that humans are *not* seen as the only or indeed the highest forms of beings – let alone being as such. In their view, this implies the gravest of mistakes; namely, to reduce the general problem of philosophy to a *mere* anthropology. Against this, Arendt's de-centring of the human condition vis-à-vis the world remains a fundamentally humanist position: her interest was above all to understand the *human* condition. See Chapter 1.

that sustains material objects and social institutions. These, in turn, are also part of the even longer *cyclical* movements of nature itself: '[t]hat every individual life between birth and death can eventually be told as a story with beginning and end is the prepolitical and prehistorical condition of history' (1998: 184). The combination of these temporalities is essential to how we experience the human condition, Arendt contends: the constancy and stability that is required for individual human life is provided by the pre-constituted temporality of social institutions and, above all, the inert temporality of natural and material objects: '[i]f nature and the earth generally constitute the condition of human *life*, then the world and the things of the world constitute the condition under which this specifically human life can be at home on earth' (1998: 134; also 19, 96–8).

Arendt's depiction of the active side of the human condition is then formed by these three realms that humans experience as external in their unique way: the *natural* exteriority of necessity, the *artificial* exteriority of materiality and the *intersubjective* exteriority of human plurality. Exteriority, she then contends, is central to all our worldly experiences of objectivity and stability; constancy and externality are the conditions of possibility for self-transcendence. Self-transcendence, as the most *internal* of our human contributions to outer existence, becomes possible thanks to the all-too-real *exteriority* of the world we inhabit. The possibility of suspension, revision and recreation that self-transcendence requires is made possible by the ontological certainty the outside world creates: '[i]f nature and the earth generally constitute the condition of human *life*, then the world and the things of the world constitute the condition under which this specifically human life can be at home on earth' (1998: 134).

In addition to the five human senses with which humans interact with the world, Arendt contends that we are in possession of a sixth one that allows us to translate private sensations into public utterances: human sociality, our intersubjectivity, creates the possibility of social inclusion that we experience as a second *birth*.⁴ To the same extent that a purely private world would deprive the individual from a sense of permanence and a grasp of humanity's own plurality, we are in possession of a sense through which we experience a common world that is created by human beings themselves (1978 I: 50–8, 1998: 176). Humans have always *dreamed* of a way of life that is devoid of necessity and its toils, a life

⁴ As we will see below, this idea of second birth is consistent with Arendt's idea of natality. See also Chapter 8 on the reproduction of life, where we look at the ways in which debates on reproduction and abortion are framed within the idea that the *organic* life of the foetus needs to be *socially* inscribed for it to be acknowledged as an 'authentic' human being.

whose external restrictions are to be overcome more or less at will. To Arendt this is not really available to humans but, more importantly, it would be undesirable in so far as defining their very humanity:

[t]he human condition is such that pain and effort are not just symptoms which can be removed without changing life itself; they are rather the modes in which life itself, together with the necessity to which it is bound, makes itself felt. For mortals, the “easy life of the gods” would be a lifeless life (1998: 120)

External constraints may not be willingly embraced but they are far from disposable. This is another reason that justifies locating the ability for self-transcendence at the centre of Arendt’s contribution to our understanding of the human condition: humans *need*, *can* and in certain crucial moments also *must* transcend the barriers and restrictions that constitute the world that surrounds them. We do this in a variety of ways – from personal empathy to theological speculation, from moral reasoning to artistic creations – but in all cases a form of self-decentring is crucially at stake: as we temporarily suspend the egocentric standpoint and try to adopt different perspectives, we are also able to bracket the restrictions that are actually in place and then imagine a *different* state of affairs – a *world* that may well become different.

Defined as the intrinsically human ability to carve out a space for ourselves, self-transcendence is central to our ‘interior’ relation with our own self as much as it is to our relations with the world ‘outside’: it is to be found both in active and in contemplative life. In the case of labour, *animal laborans* discharges the uncertainty and toil of necessity into the stability of objects that *homo faber* is able to produce through work. *Animal laborans* is able to find self-transcendence in *homo faber*’s ability to create useful tools and objects, and thus a world that is materially durable: this is the transcendence of urgency and necessity in the stability and planning that is afforded by tools and instrumental action. In turn, *homo faber* faces its own problems of ‘internal transcendence’; in this case, contends Arendt, the challenge has to do with the emptiness, the ‘meaninglessness’, of a world that is full of material objects but has no significant others. The world of *homo faber* is not a fully human one because it lacks social, cultural and indeed normative standards that can effectively orient the use we give to objects: in the purely instrumental world of *homo faber*, nothing has an intrinsic value because everything can be turned into a means for ulterior ends (1998: 236–7). Indeed, the idea of pure instrumental action reveals itself as a contradiction in terms because when all ends *can* become means, then we have no ends at all as all we have are means. This tragedy of *homo faber* cannot be resolved internally but requires its own self-transcendence; it has to be transposed onto the realm of action because questions about the meaning of life can

only be raised in society alongside others. Arendt argues that action and speech are different from labour and work because while individual men *can* live without labouring and working, they cannot do so without action and speech (1998: 176). However imperfectly, *animal laborans* and *homo faber* can be seen from the standpoint of both a single individual and a wholly homogeneous idea of humanity. Yet action and speech cannot be understood in this way because they necessarily involve human plurality. *Animal laborans* is a subject (to the urges of necessity), *homo faber* is a master (of the things it creates), but only action and speech produce the horizontal and collaborative sociality that depends on the presence of other human beings as partners and interlocutors (1998: 151).⁵ Equally importantly, action and speech differ from labour and work because there are no external standards that secure their fulfilment. For action and language, self-transcendence is always internal to the purely human result of human interaction (1998: 236–7). Arendt speaks of the ‘threefold frustration’ with our understandings of human action; namely, the fact that their outcomes are unpredictably, that chains of events may be irreversible and that authors may remain unknown (1998: 220). To act, in short, means to take initiative, to begin something that is truly *new*; the human capacity for ‘action means that the unexpected can be expected’ (1998: 178). A human is a being from whom one expects the unexpected.⁶

In so far as action implies renewal, natality now joins plurality as the twin pillars of Arendt’s understanding of the human condition. The human freedom thus created is nothing short of unbearable:

If left to themselves, human affairs can only follow the law of mortality, which is the most certain and the only reliable law of a life spent between birth and death. It is the faculty of action that interferes with this law because it interrupts the inexorable automatic course of daily life, which in its turn, as we saw, interrupted and interfered with the cycle of the biological life process . . . The miracle that saves the world, the realm of human affairs, from its normal, “natural” ruin is ultimately the fact of natality, in which the faculty of action is ontologically rooted. (1998: 246–7)⁷

⁵ In a different context, Georg Simmel spoke about the democratic structure of all sociability: ‘everyone should guarantee to the other that maximum of sociable values (joy, relief, vivacity) which is consonant with the maximum of values he himself receives. As justice upon the Kantian basis is thoroughly democratic, so likewise this principle shows the *democratic structure of all sociability* . . . Sociability creates, if one will, an *ideal* sociological world, for in it . . . the pleasure of the individual is always contingent upon the joy of others’ (Simmel 1949: 257, my italics). See Chernilo (2013a: 182–91) and also Chapter 5, below.

⁶ In Arendt’s interpretation, this indeterminacy of action leads Kant to concentrate his moral theory on motives and principles rather than on goals and consequences (1998: 235). We will come back to Arendt’s interpretation of Kant.

⁷ This reference to natality offers a deep though largely unexplored connection between Hannah Arendt and Hans Jonas’s idea of life (see Chapter 4). Safranski (1998: 383)

The importance of plurality for Arendt's understanding of the human condition allows her to further argue that politics is an especially important domain in human life. Plurality, she argues, 'constitutes the political realm' and human plurality is expressed as *both* individual uniqueness and collective particularity: '[j]ust as there exists no human being as such, but only men and women who in their absolute distinctness are the same, that is, *human*, so this shared human sameness is the *equality* that in turn manifests itself only in the absolute distinction of one equal from another' (2005: 61). This existential connection between politics and plurality also accounts for the difficult relationships between politics and philosophy. In Arendt's reading, philosophy and theology share the inadequate pre-supposition that the human condition can be conceived as exempt from human plurality: '[b]ecause philosophy and theology are always concerned with *man*, because all their pronouncements would be correct if there were only one or two men or only identical men, they have found no valid philosophical answer to the question: What is politics?' (2005: 93). A further *philosophical* difficulty in understanding politics as human plurality comes from the fact that thinking, central as it is to philosophy, remains a *solitary* activity. When the tradition of political thought tries to come to terms with the fact that human life is indeed plural, it then faces the problem that it is made to go too far so that, ultimately, 'human nature' resides in politics. Quite the contrary, Arendt argues, '*man* is apolitical. Politics arises *between men*, and so quite *outside of man*. There is therefore no real political substance. Politics arises in what lies in *between men* and is established as relationships' (2005: 95).⁸ It is again the question of the relationships between humans and the world that prevents any definition of *human* nature as political *nature*. Politics is misunderstood if defined through ideas of power and domination because this wrongly equates the *human* fact of plurality – action and speech – with a particular set of *conflictual* social relations.

In relation to Western theology, its difficulties in grasping human plurality derive from monotheism: if god is one and only one, and man is created in the image of god, then all men must be the same. Likeness and similarity rather than uniqueness and plurality become the representation of what constitutes our common humanity: '[g]od created *man*, but *men* are a human, earthly product, the product of human nature' (2005: 93).

suggests, somewhat crudely but not without plausibility, that Arendt's concern with natality (and I think this applies also to Jonas's argument on the centrality of biological life) is an inversion of Heidegger's early concern with death in *Being and Time*.

⁸ Rodrigo Cordero (2014a) has explored with great sophistication Arendt's concept of the 'in-between'. But below I will emphasise that her position is closer to mainstream sociology than she herself was able to realise.

Theology may still think of the human as an individual whose existence is a result of non-human sources, but we cannot do the same if we contend that humans owe *their nature* to the existence and mutual recognition of others. Legal equality, which is an ancient rather than a modern invention, remains the most fundamental normative intuition because it gives human plurality concrete form and substantive purchase: '[t]his voluntary guarantee of, and concession to, a claim of legal equality recognizes the plurality of men, who can thank themselves for their plurality and the creator of *man* for their existence' (2005: 94). Arendt contends that the constancy of human dualities when seeking to account for the human condition – body and soul, interests and ideals, nature and culture – is in fact a result of human plurality. There is however a radical difference between human equality understood as something given and human equality as something that is co-constituted through human interaction. Arendt offers here her own version of the so-called secularisation debate that marks the rise of modernity:

Political equality, therefore, is the very opposite of our equality before death, which as the common fate of all men arises out of the human condition, or of equality before God, at least in the Christian interpretation, where we are confronted with an equality of sinfulness inherent in human nature. In these instances, no equalizer is needed because sameness prevails anyhow. (1998: 215)⁹

II

A key element in Arendt's critique of modernism is found in her scepticism towards the utilitarian premises that play such a major role in modern societies. In its individualistic bent that centres on 'happiness', but also in its more consistent collectivist tradition that focuses on general 'utility', utilitarianism remains a flawed philosophical position because it unduly locates *homo faber* as the representative of the human condition as a whole. *Homo faber* goes to the market as the isolated producer who is prepared to exchange all the fruits of her work for the one commodity that is able to dissolve all forms of substantive value: money (1998: 166). Although in the market *homo faber* has a public and becomes a member of the public, she can never engage in a genuine realm of human plurality (1998: 160–2). Money as the standard that dissolves all standards, and the marketplace as an apolitical public, have become the twin institutional pillars of the modern world and its restrictive understanding of the social.

⁹ This argument is central to Arendt's generation in their critique of the excessive modernism of the social sciences. With different political, philosophical and indeed theological overtones, we found it in writers such as Karl Löwith (1964), Leo Strauss (1974) and Eric Voegelin (2000). I have discussed this at length in Chernilo (2013a: 39–70). For a modernist counterargument, see, classically, Blumenberg (1983: 27–51).

Because no return to the past is available, we cannot recreate *absolute* standards of judgement that are exempt from critical scrutiny. But as *previous* standards become obsolete, the human world still requires *some* standards because they alone express those things people care about in their own right:

[t]he loss of standards, which does indeed define the modern world in its facticity and cannot be reversed by any sort of return to the good old days or by some arbitrary promulgation of new standards and values, is therefore a catastrophe in the moral world *only if one assumes that people are actually incapable for making original judgements*. (2005: 104, my italics)

Human imagination and creativity are central for the renewal of standards that take place in modernity; they are central for the *possibility* of self-transcendence to be realised in concrete situations.

We can see the radicality of Arendt's insight if we now compare it to her rather unusual take on Kant's moral theory. On the one hand, Arendt accepts that Kant's insight that humans are to be treated as ends in themselves was devised as a way to constrain the role of utilitarianism in moral thinking. Kant's intentions were laudable as he wanted to *restrict* the utilitarian point of view 'to its proper place and prevent its use in the field of political action' (1998: 156). But Arendt then claims that by framing his moral theory in terms of means and ends, Kant had in fact adopted the way of thinking he sought to overcome; Kant's position is already contaminated by the very utilitarianism he was criticising. Not only that, Arendt goes as far as to say that: '[t]he anthropocentric utilitarianism of *homo faber* found its greatest expression in the Kantian formula that no man must ever become a means to an end, that every human being is an end in himself' (1998: 155, underlining mine). Arendt justifies this indictment by arguing that Kant had no need to make this move because Plato had already made plain the reductionism that was involved in adopting a teleological approach to human action and morality:

if one makes man the measure of all things for use, it is man the user and instrumentalizer, and not man the speaker and doer or man the thinker, to whom the world is being related. And since it is in the nature of man the user and instrumentalizer to look upon everything as means to an end . . . this must eventually mean that man becomes the measure not only of things whose existence depend upon him but of literally of everything there is. (1998: 158)¹⁰

¹⁰ Another, admittedly more conventional, way of putting this problem would be to argue that, while Kant sought to see private and public autonomy as co-constitutive, in the case of his moral thinking the latter has primacy over the former (Habermas 1996: 84). Whereas Kant made it clear that the public use of reason is essential for the actualisation, as it were, of the categorical imperative of morality, this has not prevented leading exponents of contemporary Kantianism, like Habermas and Rawls, from arguing that this is not enough to make Kant's position truly *dialogical*. See, for the opposite argument, Höffe (1995). We come back to this issue in Chapters 4, 5 and 6.

This utilitarian approach is fundamentally inadequate when applied to the human realm of interactions because action and speech, as ‘specifically human achievements’, lie ‘altogether outside the category of means and ends’ (1998: 206–7). To be sure, from a sociological point of view, the claim that action is *not* to be related to notions of means and ends is counterintuitive at best.¹¹ And below we will also see that thinking itself is equally distinct from instrumental rationality – therein lies, for instance, the mark that separates thinking as such from a philosophical quest for knowledge and the pragmatism of the modern scientific attitude. But the plausibility of the argument depends on the success of *homo faber* in the fabrication of the (modern) world: the more the world becomes full of useful things, the more it also becomes apparent that its meaning lies elsewhere: ‘[n]ot even Kant could solve the perplexity or enlighten the blindness of *homo faber* with respect to the problem of meaning without turning to the paradoxical “end in itself”’ (1998: 156).¹²

But before we can fully assess Arendt’s interpretation of Kant, we still need to consider her wider debt to him. Thus, in her *Lectures on Kant’s Political Philosophy*, Arendt is interested in Kant’s famous dictum on the impossibility of rational metaphysics. According to Kant, metaphysics can never be rational because the most fundamental questions that humans ask themselves cannot be answered definitively and rationally; rather, they are bound to remain subject to metaphysical *speculation*. The so-called ‘scandal of reason’ consists in the inability to definitively settle the following three questions: what can I know? (i.e. does god actually exist?) what ought I to do? (how am I to handle my own freedom?) and what may I hope for? (why do I exist at all if I am going to die?). At first sight, Arendt argues, it may seem strange that Kant did not ask himself directly the most obvious question of them all – what is a human being – but then she argues that to Kant this was no more than the logical consequence of putting together those three questions (1992: 20–32).¹³

Arendt further elaborates that there are three perspectives through which, according to Kant, we *can* look at ‘the affairs of men’ (1992: 26).

¹¹ From Weber to Schutz and Habermas himself, the claim remains that a teleological structure is central to *all* forms of social action (Habermas 1984a: 102–41).

¹² Another way of looking at the importance of the relationship between means and ends is provided by Helmuth Plessner (1970: 38): the anthropological centrality of instrumental action derives from the particular position of the human body that is *also* an instrument for humans themselves.

¹³ It is this argument on the irrational nature of metaphysics, says Arendt, that led Marx and Nietzsche to pursue it to its only logical conclusion: to abandon philosophy altogether (1992: 36).

We have, first, the potential standpoint of the human species as a whole. To the extent that the species can duly be referred to in the singular, the continuation of its existence does depend on the successful adaptation to nature that Arendt contends can be deemed as *progressive*. The life of a single individual is too short to encapsulate the general progress the species does experience, but to the extent that our everyday life has been increasingly, and to great portions of the world's population completely, discharged from the toils of having to provide for our physical needs, this is indeed progress in an unequivocal sense. There is, second, the individual human being who is an end in itself. We have seen that, in Arendt's interpretation, this moral being is fundamentally dependent on *homo faber*, so she argues that a human as a reasonable being who is able to legislate for herself through her use of reason takes her bearings from the world of objects she herself has created. Instrumental action is then the precondition rather than the opposite of moral action: instead of being able to exercise control over instrumental action, the categorical imperative of morality is subordinated to it. There are, finally, humans in plural, men and women who live in political communities and are endowed with their intersubjective 'common' sense. Rather than isolated individuals who toil or fabricators who go to the market, here we find individuals who need one another and who, through their coordination, create the common world in which they live; people for whom sociability alone is a 'true "end"' (1992: 26).

Arendt rightly observes that there is an internal difficulty inside Kant's threefold conception of the human: while the idea of man's inner dignity – the end in himself – accepts no historical progression and requires the same dignity for all human beings (past, present and future), our species's adaptation to the world is on the contrary based on an idea of progress in which the future is anticipated as superior to both past and present. Teleological justifications that refer to the species as a whole are not easily reconcilable with endowing every single individual with equal dignity and moral insight: 'the very idea of progress – if it is more than a change in circumstances and an improvement of the world – contradicts Kant's notion of man's dignity. *It is against human dignity to believe in progress*' (1992: 77, my italics).¹⁴ Critical as it is of Kant's arguments, this formulation still does not

¹⁴ Somewhat enigmatically, Arendt summarises her views as follows: '[t]he world is a beautiful place and therefore a fit place for men to live in, but *individual* men would never choose to live again. Man as a moral being is an end in himself, but the human species is subject to progress, which, of course, is somehow in opposition to man as a moral and rational creature, an end in himself' (1992: 31, my italics). This formulation seems to reflect the remnants of an existentialist sensibility in her work.

explain why Arendt claims that Kant's moral theory is the *greatest* expression of anthropocentric utilitarianism. Given Kant's threefold idea of the human being that Arendt brings to the open, it is difficult to contend that Kant offered a reductionist account of the moral side of human beings. A more consistent argument, it seems to me, is that Kant consciously adopted the terms of utilitarianism in order to *redefine* them; he worked through them as a way of placing internal limitations on utilitarian positions. Ideas of means and ends are to be used with regard to human beings because they bring the potentially endless chain of means and ends to a *possible normative close*: slavery, standing armies, self-imposed ignorance and seeking to buy someone's assent are *all* affronts to human dignity on the grounds that they undermine an individual's moral integrity as an end in itself. It is Kant's *modernism*, his early yet insightful understanding of the relevance of instrumental rationality, that pushes him in the direction of wholly redrawing the boundaries of, and thus limiting, that can actually be thought with utilitarian concepts in the field of morality.

A more positive side to Arendt's reading of Kant becomes apparent when she discusses the idea that humans can transcend their own position in the world because they can observe it from different standpoints. There is, according to Kant, a specific form of human imagination that consists in 'comparing *our* judgment with the *possible* rather than *actual* judgments of others' (cited in Arendt 1992: 43, my italics). This imagination is central to the possibility of thinking, whose 'aim is to strengthen the original absent-mindedness of thought' (1978 I: 155), but it is also crucial for the activity of judgement (1978 I: 76, 92). The key here lies in Kant's idea of impartiality, says Arendt, which is not a principle of action but a *viewpoint* from which to 'reflect upon human affairs ... *impartiality* is obtained by taking the viewpoints of others into account; impartiality is not the result of some higher standpoint that would then actually settle the dispute by being altogether above the *melée*' (1992: 44 and 42). A universal sense of moral sympathy is a core attribute of critical thinking itself and Arendt comments on Kant's terminology by giving it a name this anthropological skill: the 'disinterested delight' or 'enlarged mentality' that depends on public communicability. Once again, speech and action are seen as the cornerstone of human plurality (1992: 43–5, 68–73).

Kant thought that, as humans, we belong always and necessarily in at least two overlapping communities: there is, first, our local community, from which we take our more direct understanding of the world, and there is also a second, broader cosmopolitan community. This is the 'world community' to which we belong 'by the sheer fact of being human ... When one judges and when one acts in political matters, one is supposed to take one's bearings from the idea, not the actuality, of being a world citizen

and, therefore, also a *Weltbetrachter*, a world spectator' (1992: 75–6, underlining mine). Arendt makes here a strong connection between the possibility of impartiality and a theory of the spectator: human plurality is 'the law of the earth' because all human interventions presuppose a spectator (1978 I: 19).¹⁵ An actor can never be fully impartial because his deeds are always ultimately dependent on how he *appears* to others (1992: 55). The distinction between a local and a cosmopolitan sense of belonging does not neatly overlap with the one between political actor and impartial spectator, however. With regards to cosmopolitan belonging, impartiality is what constitutes us as political actors. The cosmopolitan community thus constituted is of course an idea but this does not make it any less real than the actual communities people live in: '[a]n "enlarged mentality" is the condition *sine qua non* of right judgment . . . Private conditions condition us; imagination and reflection enable us to *liberate* ourselves from them and to attain that relative impartiality that is the specific virtue of judgment' (1992: 73).

This argument is full of consequences for the social sciences, as it speaks about an idea of empathy that is based on our *human* rather than our *sociocultural* commonalities. Thus seen, empathy requires that we *creatively imagine* what are the conditions others may be going through so that we can envisage their possible rather than their actual judgements. The fact that we *can* exercise this competence of comparing actual and possible judgements depends on our human ability to recognise each other as human beings rather than on whether we have experienced similar situations. Basing empathy on the particularity of common experiences *alone*, that is, without making use of this enlarged mentality, runs the risk of merely reproducing prejudice, self-righteousness or mere just self-interest.¹⁶ Here it is worth quoting Arendt's argument at length:

Men, though they are *totally conditioned existentially* – limited by the time span between birth and death, subject to labor in order to live, motivated to work in order to make themselves at home in the world, and roused to action in order to find their place in the society of their fellow-men – *can mentally transcend all these*

¹⁵ Kant's idea of impartial observation is built on Adam Smith's (2009: 133–6, 227–46) earlier argument on the impartial spectator. More generally, there is the wider 'Copernican' question of man's position in the universe: to observe the starry heavens as a way of reflecting on our human position in the cosmos (Blumenberg 1987: 3–27, 60). In Blumenberg's reconstruction, the human proclivity to theorising belongs to our interest in *contemplatio caeli* (contemplation of the heavens): 'The condition for our ability to observe heaven is the earth under our feet' (Blumenberg 2015: 49). See also Hawkins (2015: 143–8) and note 17, below.

¹⁶ Contemporary arguments on 'intersectionality' wholly miss this point and, on the contrary, are based on the impossibility of this withdrawal, which they can only see as deceptive, naive, arrogant or self-serving (Walby *et al.* 2012, Yuval-Davis 2006).

conditions, but only mentally, never in reality . . . They can judge affirmatively or negatively the realities they are born into and by which they are also conditioned; they can will the impossible, for instance, eternal life; and they can think, that is, speculate meaningfully, about the unknown and the unknowable. And although this can never directly change reality – indeed in our world there is no clearer or more radical opposition than that between thinking and doing – *the principles by which we act and the criteria by which we judge and conduct our lives depend ultimately on the life of the mind.* (1978 I: 70–1, my italics)

Seen as the mental precondition for self-transcendence, thinking is not something that takes place freely or effortlessly. Alienation and self-transcendence are intimately related in Arendt's argument because they offer one general form in which humans set out the relationships between the interior life of the mind and the exterior worlds of nature, instruments and sociality. As with Hegel and Marx, for Arendt alienation is not something exceptional but it is rather normal occurrence in human existence. Alienation is one fundamental dimension that transpires from the intrinsic difficulties that come with this dual process of inward and outward self-decentring: alienation is another name for the gap between the general possibility of self-transcendence and its always contingent and challenging realisation. Indeed, Arendt's opening image in *The Human Condition* – space travel – is for her the quintessential expression of the twofold alienation of modern society: as the escape from the world into the self becomes increasingly tiresome, humans now attempt a new, apparently more radical but arguably even more futile, escape from the earth into the universe: '[w]orld alienation, and not self-alienation as Marx thought, has been the hallmark of the modern age' (1998: 254).¹⁷

III

We have said that, *In Life of the Mind*, Arendt's argument on *thinking, willing* and *judging* is construed in a similar way to how, in *The Human Condition*, she had introduced *labour, work* and *action*. In the case of our mental faculties, it is the temporal dimension that organises Arendt's triadic structure: thinking belongs to the present, judging belongs to the past and willing to the future (1978 I: 191). Thinking plays a major role in the argument on the *vita contemplativa* because it is the skill that actually

¹⁷ In *The Human Condition*, Arendt discusses space travel as part of the permanent quest for an 'Archimedean point'. See also (1998: 1–6, 262–4, 284; 1978 I: 54, 62–5). Daniel Sage (2014) has uncovered the wide range of nationalistic, civilisational and religious connotations that space travel achieved in the US at the time, and one may wonder whether Arendt also fell in love with some of these epochal overtones, or indeed whether she used these tropes consciously in order to appeal to her American audience.

makes willing and judging possible. Thinking alone allows for the *withdrawal* that is necessary for the activation of the life of the mind as a whole; thinking implies a temporary yet essential withdrawal from the world, it requires the suspension of our relationship with the world and comes to an end as soon as ‘the real world asserts itself again’ (1978 I: 75).¹⁸ The thinking ego is neither an empirical self nor the soul in so far as they are concerned with our feelings and bodily experiences. The thinking ego has the ability to offer a critique of that which appears as given and thus involves a ‘radical’ break from what becomes available to the senses; the thinking ego is therefore ‘ageless, sexless, without qualities, and without a life story’ (1978 I: 43). What makes the thinking ego *radical* is the fact that it takes objects as they are given in the world and then attributes to them a new, general, meaning through this mental ‘experiment of the self with itself’ (1978 I: 74). Pure thinking is constituted in this fashion: ‘it is this *duality* of myself with myself that makes thinking a true activity, in which I am both the one who asks and the one who answers’ (1978 I: 185).¹⁹ The thinking ego, then, is unconditioned, invisible, reflexive and self-contained. But given the fact of human plurality, Arendt argues that the thinking ego, while it lives in solitude, it is never lonely; it is soundless though not silent, it needs words but has not listeners (1978 I: 32, 47, 71–5, 98–9). The thinking ego is singular but is never *only* one: the thinking ego is ‘the two-in-one of soundless dialogue . . . while engaged in the dialogue of solitude, in which I am strictly by myself, I am not altogether separated from that plurality which is the world of men and which we call, in its most general sense, humanity’ (2005: 22).

This intrinsic unworldliness of thinking makes it hardly surprising that it has traditionally appeared as the opposite of the active life. The same unworldliness, moreover, prevents us from turning thinking into the key or essential marker of the shared humanity of human beings. Through its rejection of appearances, the thinking ego possesses an intrinsic reflexive ability that is fundamentally ‘self-destructive’ with regard to ‘its own results . . . thinking itself can never be solidly established as one and even the highest property of the human species’ (1978 I: 88). Yet at the same time, as a purely contemplative life is not wholly human, Arendt equally contends that a life fully devoid of thinking also ‘fails to develop its own essence – it is not merely meaningless; it is not fully alive. Unthinking men are like sleepwalkers’ (1978 I: 191). Thinking as the possibility of self-transcendence, connects rather than separates the *vita activa* and the

¹⁸ See also (1978 I: 32–5, 43, 72–8, 87–92, 197–9, 205–6).

¹⁹ See also (1978 I: 179–93). To that extent, Arendt’s notion of thinking comes close to the idea of internal conversation that we will explore in Chapter 7.

vita contemplativa: ‘whenever I transcend the limits of my own life span and begin to reflect on this past, judging it, and this future, forming projects of the will, thinking ceases to be a politically marginal activity’ (1978 I: 192). Because thinking is another particular expression of human plurality, it is also deeply connected to politics.

There is still one further quality of the thinking ego that Arendt addresses in a more allegorical language. The thinking ego, she says, is ‘the fellow who awaits you if and when you come home’; it is only possible *as I become my own friend* (1978 I: 191). There are some puzzling aspects in Arendt’s argument here. The notion of being one’s own friend may be seen as taxing *psychologically* but does not necessarily contradict the spirit of Arendt’s argument: I must be at ease with myself so that I can *think* as I talk freely to myself. But the reference to ‘home’ as necessarily a *good* place, the one you look forward to going back to, seems at odds with the critical and reflexive distance that constitutes the thinking ego – and indeed to her own idea of cosmopolitan belonging. Home may well be, for a number of different reasons, the *last* place to which you want to return and, as you nonetheless do so because it *is* home after all, it may well be the case that you do *not* find friends there.

Thinking as the two-in-one of human life, thinking as withdrawal from the world, thinking as homey friendship; to these now Arendt adds thinking as the curiosity that is necessary for science and philosophy to emerge: ‘it is in the nature of the human surveying capacity that it can function only if man *disentangles himself* from all involvement in and concern with the close at hand and *withdraws* himself to a distance from everything near him’ (1998: 251, my italics). But science and philosophy do differ in their intellectual attitudes; not least in relation to the type of questions they pose (and the answers that would then be deemed acceptable):

In asking ultimate, unanswerable questions, man establishes himself as a question-asking being. This is the reason that science, which asks answerable questions, owes its origins to philosophy, an origin that remains its ever-present source of throughout the generations. Were man to lose the faculty of asking ultimate questions, he would by the same token lose his faculty of asking answerable questions. (2005: 34)²⁰

While thinking as a pure anthropological capacity is not to be equated with philosophy as a whole, it is still the case that more ‘permanent’ – metaphysical or existential – questions bring thinking closer together

²⁰ In different formulations of this argument, however, Arendt hesitates: while she most consistently contends that ‘old’ questions remain but answers change historically (1978 I: 10), in her more political essays she does doubt whether traditional ‘metaphysical’ questions remain at all relevant in modern life (2006: 8).

to philosophy than to science. In relation to the former, she however rejects any version of dualism in which true 'being' opposes the realm of appearances (1978 I: 42, 46). At the same time, Arendt criticises any anthropocentric interpretation of the world as if it were a human creation that exists only for the fulfilment of human purposes: nobody can really *make* himself or *produce* his own existence (1978 I: 215).

This is not the place to attempt a thorough account of Arendt's relationship with Heidegger, which has of course been a source of extended commentary and gossip.²¹ But given that they both directed systematic attention to the question of thinking, some remarks are relevant to our discussion. Arendt takes from Heidegger the opening statement that, in the philosophical tradition, thinking is defined as the opposite of action: thinking implies withdrawal and there is a close connection between thinking and poetry (1978 I: 71–5, 108). But the commonalities stop there as Arendt's argument is construed as a rather explicit counterpoint to Heidegger's: if for Arendt thinking refers to the internal dialogue of a thinking ego that is directed to objects in the world, for Heidegger pure thinking is the elite activity of the chosen few. For Arendt, as we have seen, thinking is the general anthropological capacity of *stop and think* that allows humans not only to regain some control over their lives but to creatively envisage something that is new. For Heidegger, on the contrary, it is defined in terms of the fundamental realisation that thinking is exclusively to do with thinking itself. Thinking is the professional craft of the philosopher; the slow, painful and authoritative *listening* to the great minds of the past in a process that leads to understanding the *one* idea that a genuine thinker may be able to develop over the course of a lifetime (Heidegger 2004: 15, 30, 50). The worldliness of Arendt's conception of thinking is the exact opposite of Heidegger's ethereal conception of it. The following quotation describes what Heidegger considers is the *wrong* approach to thinking. But what he says there can be used as a positive definition of Arendt's own approach to thinking

as a theme with which one might deal as with any other. Thus thinking becomes the object of an investigation. The investigation considers a process that occurs in man. Man takes a special part in the process, in that he performs the thinking. Yet this fact, that man is naturally the performer of thinking, *need not further concern the investigation of thinking.* The fact goes without saying. Being irrelevant, it may be left out of our reflection on thinking. Indeed, *it must be left out.* For *the laws of thought are after all valid independently of the man who performs the individual acts of thinking.* (Heidegger 2004: 115, my italics)

²¹ See Brunkhorst (2014), Jonas (2008: 59–72, 176–94), Tchir (2011) and Young-Bruehl (2004: 50–69).

The idea that thinking can be explored without humans is of course wholly alien to Arendt, for whom it is precisely the human quality of thinking that makes thinking worthy of attention. And indeed the last sentence in the quotation above does not refer to the laws of logic that may be said to rule abstract thinking, but to the fact that *being calls for thinking* (Heidegger 2004: 120–5). Arendt's humanism, and the development of an increasingly systematic anthropology, are antithetical to Heidegger's project.

In fact, in *The Life of the Mind* Arendt mentions Heidegger several times but she does not focus on Heidegger's lecture course *What Is Called Thinking?* Her most significant discussion of Heidegger in that book takes place in the context of her discussion of willing. Arendt pays special attention there to Heidegger's studies of Nietzsche, which took place immediately after his failed period as rector. Heidegger delivered his Nietzsche lecture courses between 1936 and 1940 and Arendt contends that while Heidegger first accepted the Nietzschean vision of the will to power, he then turned against it and came up with a negative rendition of it as the 'Will-not-to-will' (1978 II: 172–94). It is this reinterpretation of Nietzsche, says Arendt, that is at the heart of Heidegger's famous 'turn' or 'reversal'. In her interpretation, this is an argument that refers *less* to the move from an anthropology of *Dasein* to a metaphysics of Being in general (as we discussed in Chapter 1) and more to the philosopher's realisation that the will to action, the will to impose one's will on the world, is to be resisted by an even more decisive 'Will-not-to-will'. Although the reversal only became apparent with the publication of Heidegger's *Letter on Humanism* in 1947, Arendt contends that, biographically, it is to be traced to this period in the late 1930s: '[t]his re-interpretation of the "reversal," rather than the reversal itself, determines the entire development of Heidegger's late philosophy' (1978 II: 175). As Heidegger rejects the modern subjectivism of the will, the only notion of the will that remains acceptable for him is the 'Will-not-to-will': even then, however, will is secondary to contemplative pure thinking (1978 II: 185).

Arendt reads Heidegger's rendition of this 'Will-not-to-will' as the definitive expression of his old master's political repentance: after having committed to self-affirmation of the *Volk*, the only acceptable form of will that remained open to him was the one that rejected willing altogether: '[i]n Heidegger's understanding, the will to rule and to dominate is a kind of original sin, of which he found himself guilty when he tried to come to terms with his brief past in the Nazi movement' (1978 II: 173). Not altogether different from Derrida's interpretation of Heidegger, Arendt here seems primarily interested in reintegrating Heidegger into the philosophical canon by showing that his commitment to Nazism was short-lived, inconsequential and, above all, that through the means of

philosophy Heidegger did show the kind of remorse that he never offered in public. But Arendt has no need to offer the kind of hermeneutical sophistication that we encountered in Derrida because she was also to make a biographical connection to the thinker himself. Her act of rehabilitation has the authoritative, yet also somewhat fallacious, tone of those who knew events and characters first-hand.

IV

If we go back to the issue of Arendt's depiction of the modern world, we may remember that we started this chapter with the claim that, while the anthropological capabilities that Arendt is speaking about are a general property of the human species as a whole, their instantiation is fundamentally dependent on socio-historical circumstances. Arendt claims that the rise of modern social life implies a threefold *reversal* of how the human condition discloses itself to us. First, there is the experience of an inversion in the hierarchical position between active and contemplative life: while in premodern times the latter was consistently regarded as superior to the former – not least because the distinction itself was coined and sustained by philosophers themselves – in modern times the opposite has become the case: deeds rather than speech, technology rather thinking, have taken centre stage. This may be seen as Marx's greatest contribution to our understanding of modern social life. To Arendt, Marx breaks with the conventional philosophical predicament that thinking ranks higher than action by locating 'interest' – collective *class* interest – as the essence of our humanity: '[w]hat is decisive is the further linking of interest not so much to the laboring class as to labor itself as the preeminent human activity' (2005: 79). Arendt's argument is not only that the *vita activa* has become more appealing in modern times, but that the *vita contemplativa* itself is no longer able to engage with the transformations and challenges of modern times: '[o]nly when the *vita activa* had lost its point of reference in the *vita contemplativa* could it become active life in the full sense of the word' (1998: 320).

The second inversion speaks directly to the question of freedom. In classical times, politics was seen as the realm of freedom whereas the household was that of necessity and personal domination. But in modernity the opposite is the case: politics is treated as the realm of power and domination while the private sphere – from the family to the market – is closer to ideas of freedom, autonomy, authenticity and self-realisation. Indeed, Arendt's well-known argument on 'the rise of the social' centres precisely on the idea that the interrelationships between the public and the private are anything but pristine in modern times (1998: 31–3).

The third and final inversion has to do with the fact that these two transformations make it more difficult to appreciate the changes that have taken place *within the vita activa itself* (1978 I: 6–7). More than the instrumentality of *homo faber*, she contends, what has truly triumphed in modern society is *animal laborans* and the reproduction of life itself. *Animal laborans* inhabits a world that knows only of necessity and where there is no genuine public realm – indeed, not even a market as a partly public domain. Above all, this is a world that loses sight of its own human face: ‘[m]an cannot be free if he does not know that he is subject to necessity, because his freedom is always won in his never wholly successful attempts to liberate himself from necessity’ (1998: 121). Human plurality itself is being transformed because its core has been transposed from politics to ‘the economy’. But when interest rather than freedom is seen as constitutive of human plurality, then the normative dimension of social life has itself been reduced to a resource that can be mobilised and traded more or less at will.

In modern society, direct connection to the reproduction of life is no longer visible and everything seems to hinge on consumption, but Marx himself had perceived that liberation from production, rather than emancipating mankind from necessity, tied humans back to the most basic life processes. The new realm that is now commonly referred to as ‘society’ can then become a legitimate domain of social scientific study because its constitution includes all relevant features of capitalist modernity. A preference for equivalence, predictability, regularity and functionality are all attributes of modern society that have then become central to the constitution of behaviouralism, functionalism and statistics as mainstream scientific approaches to the ‘social’ (1998: 42–3). Society then becomes the way in which ‘the fact of mutual dependence for the sake of life and nothing else assumes public significance and where the activities connected with sheer survival are permitted to appear in public’ (1998: 46). The rise of modern sociological knowledge took shape under the sign of this paradox: while it is meaningful knowledge because it starts from the recognition of uncertainty as a fundamental trait of the human condition – plurality and natality make incessant renewal an ontological fact – the social sciences direct all their efforts to narrow down this uncertainty on the basis of ‘scientific’ generalisations that can count as predictions with a policy intent. Arendt’s critique of social scientific thinking contends that regularities and predictions are not to be the ultimate goal of social science. Differently put, while social scientific thinking believes it has succeeded in capturing the key mode of existence of *homo faber*, this is in fact inadequate because in her view *animal laborans* has in fact more important in modernity. But there is another criticism of mainstream social science

that is possibly more central – and it is not cognitive or epistemological but is rather normative in orientation:

The trouble with modern theories of behaviourism is not that they are wrong but that *they could become true*, that *they actually are the best possible conceptualization of certain obvious trends in modern society*. It is quite conceivable that the modern age – which began with such unprecedented and promising outburst of human activity – may end in the deadliest, most sterile passivity history has ever known. (1998: 322, my italics)²²

Arendt criticises the self-fulfilling aspect of social scientific thinking: the more influential social scientific explanations actually become, the more they transform social relations after their own image. The objectivity of their propositions is then an expression of the newly found social relations that they themselves have helped create.

I have already mentioned that the normative motifs of her critique were indeed shared by several other intellectual émigrés who in the 1930s and 1940s had also been subjected to the degrading experiences of persecution, statelessness and exile. To them, social scientific confidence, optimism, and claims to have discovered the ultimate sources of stability in social life, were bound to look lame, voluntaristic, when not outright delusional and dangerous. Arguably the strongest formulation of Arendt's objections to mainstream social science can be found in her reply to Eric Voegelin's review of *Origins of Totalitarianism*. There, she explains that the goals of her historical study on the rise and main features of modern totalitarian regimes could not be accomplished in a purely descriptive manner:

To describe the concentration camps *sine ira et studio* is not to be “objective,” but to condone them; and such condoning cannot be changed by condemnation which the author may feel duty bound to add but which remains unrelated to the description itself. When I used the image of hell, I did not mean this allegorically but literally . . . I think that a description of the camps as Hell on earth is more “objective,” that is, more adequate to their essence than statements of a purely sociological or psychological nature. (Arendt 1953: 79)²³

²² Peter Baehr (2002, 2010) has studied at length Arendt's relationship to the social sciences of her time. See also our discussion of *homo sociologicus* in the Introduction (pp. 7–10).

²³ Their explicit differences notwithstanding, Voegelin's (1999) own study of the discursive structures of Nazi Germany supports this view that *normative descriptions* are the only adequate way of understanding the regime and its deeds. That Arendt's arguments here belong in the same breath as others in this generation of intellectuals becomes clear as we see, for instance, how closely this formulation resembles Leo Strauss's position: 'A social science that cannot speak of tyranny with the same confidence with which medicine speaks, for example, of cancer, cannot understand social phenomena as they are. It is therefore not scientific. *Present-day social science* finds itself in this condition'. But, as the

A strong though still relatively unarticulated idea of *normative description* is what transpires from Arendt's argument here. Her normative condemnation of the camps becomes a more adequate description of them because, in the camps, the very idea of humanity is under siege. Indeed, Arendt herself makes this point in *Origins*: the camps were a human experiment at transforming human nature itself (1976: 437–9). Of course, not all 'scientific' propositions will engage or touch *directly* on questions about the humanity of human beings. But the general argument that I defend in this book, and its idea of philosophical sociology, speak precisely about the need to explicitly articulate a universalistic principle of humanity. In turn, this means that the normative and descriptive tasks of the social sciences are intimately intertwined. The attempt at the destruction of human plurality constitutes the normative core of what the idea of crimes against humanity sought to protect (Jaspers 2001). In addition to the violation of the physical, social and emotional integrity of individual human beings, it is the destruction of plurality – of the multiplicity of ways of living that expresses human variety – that gives normative credence to the idea of crimes against humanity.²⁴

But beyond her critique of modern social science, there is also a sense in which Arendt seems to have lost track of what the social sciences can actually contribute to in our understanding of the modern world. In her understandable irritation with sociology's narrow-minded positivism and dogmatic functionalism, for instance, Arendt misses the point that her own idea of politics is introduced in a way that is perfectly complementary to the standard sociological theorem that society is an emergent realm that must be granted an autonomous ontological status vis-à-vis the individual: the *space* whose *structure* she seeks to understand comes very close indeed to some of sociology's best conceptions of society.²⁵ Her own ideas of plurality and worldliness, her notion that action is not possible in isolation but is always part of a wider web of acts and words (1998: 188) is again very close to, say, Simmelian notions of sociation. Indeed, what she offers here is what we may call an 'action-based' (as opposed to a systemic) theorem on the emergence of society: social life is different from human action but,

quotation continues, it also becomes apparent that Strauss's project of seeking to *restore* social scientific knowledge to a *status quo ante* is alien to Arendt's spirit: '[i]f it is true that present-day social science is the inevitable result of *modern social science* and of modern philosophy, one is forced to think of the restoration of *classical social science*' (Strauss 2004: 49, my italics). See also Baehr (2010).

²⁴ See Benhabib (2004) for further discussion and Benhabib (1996) for a wider assessment of Arendt's views about modernity.

²⁵ While he was equally critical of sociology's positivistic and functionalist tendencies, Adorno (2000) offered a more nuanced vision of the philosophical strengths of a sociological understanding of society.

because society ultimately refers back to what happens to human beings, then it cannot be fully separated from a consideration of their humanity. The eloquence of her formulation makes it worth quoting it at some length:

The space between men, which is the world, cannot, of course, exist without them, and a world without human beings, as over against a universe without human beings or nature without human beings, would be a contradiction in terms. But this does not mean that the world and the catastrophes that occur in it should be regarded as a purely human occurrence, much less that they should be reduced to something that happens to *man* or to the nature of man. For the world and the things of this world, in the midst of which human affairs take place, are not the expression of human nature, that is, the imprint of human nature turned outward, but, on the contrary, are the result of the fact that human beings produce what they themselves are not – that is, things – and that even the so-called psychological or intellectual realms become permanent realities in which people can live and move only to the extent that these realms are present as things, as a world of things. (2005: 106–7)

As I have tried to reconstruct it in this chapter, Arendt's argument about the human condition centres on four key propositions: renewal, plurality, withdrawal and materiality. Renewal, first, is defined as the intrinsically human capacity to start something a new, as expressed most fundamentally in the human natality. Plurality, second, refers to the fact that we always and necessarily live with others and in a world of practices and traditions that comes to us as pre-constituted. Withdrawal, third, is the human ability not only to *reflect* but also to temporarily *take leave* of external constraints in order to gaze at the world from a cosmopolitan, enlarged mentality. The materiality of the world, finally, emphasises that only material objects, as human *artifice*, guarantee the stability that makes human life possible. Exterior to us and subject to instrumental manipulation, the world remains partly opaque to human beings.

Arendt explicitly distinguishes between the historicity of the human condition and the anthropological universality of the *vita activa* and the *vita contemplativa*. She rejects the idea that the sum of all human activities is human nature and contends that there are no rational grounds to presuppose that humans have a timeless essence that can be described as 'nature' (1998: 10–11). Yet the idea of human nature remains available to humans themselves as we reflect on our own constitution as human beings. This movement is precisely what I have sought to reconstruct here through her idea of self-transcendence.