Definition: Arendt from Collins English Dictionary

Hannah. 1906–75, US political philosopher, born in Germany. Her publications include The Origins of Totalitarianism (1951) and Eichmann in Jerusalem (1961)

Summary Article: Hannah Arendt
From Great Thinkers A-Z

Hannah Arendt is widely recognised as among the most original and profound political thinkers of the twentieth century as well as one of the most controversial. Arendt produced no systematic political theory but dealt with a series of interrelated topics including totalitarianism, the public and private realms, the structure of public action, and the modern loss of the public realm of politics through preoccupation with economic well-being. Arendt’s work is controversial because of her abstraction, examples, and startling observations and conclusions regarding recurring themes. Even her strongest defenders find much that needs qualification and revision in her work. Such controversy would have pleased Arendt, for she did not intend to found a school of thought with disciples, but to attempt to ‘think what we are doing’ in our public and private lives. Arendt intended her work to stimulate further thought in others as it did in herself. The vast literature on Arendt is a tribute to her success at provoking others to think.

Arguably her most fundamental theme concerns human plurality and natality: humans are unique individuals with distinctive perspectives and potentials for action and with the birth of each person a new beginning enters the world. When people exchange opinions and decide how to act together so as to affect their common world, they generate the power whereby they begin something, and so display freedom. Arendt’s thought is in great measure an examination of the ways in which plurality and initiative are supported or thwarted today.

The twentieth century saw numerous brutal attacks on individuality. Through depression, statelessness and war, a great mass of people found themselves superfluous: displaced, lonely and vilified. Arendt, as a German Jew, knew superfluity first-hand. Born in 1906 to a German Jewish family, Arendt studied with the eminent philosophers Martin Heidegger and Karl Jaspers, and wrote her dissertation on Augustine’s concept of love under Jaspers’ direction. Threatened by the rise of National Socialism, Arendt fled Germany for Paris in 1933. With the fall of Paris, she was briefly interned but escaped to the United States where she wrote and taught until her death in 1975.

In The Origins of Totalitarianism (1951), Arendt holds that Hitler’s and Stalin’s regimes are instances of a new form of government - totalitarianism - which differs from an older, superficially similar form - tyranny - the rule by one for his own sake at the expense of the populace. Totalitarianism is a social movement driven by a thoroughly developed, mythic ideology that offers to the masses of the displaced and lost the certainty of a thoroughgoing, consistent account of the world, rooted in race or class struggle. Ideologies offer the masses a refuge from the complex, confusing reality in which they can gain no footing because, in their loneliness, they lack interlocutors with whom to achieve a common
perspective for thought and action. Totalitarian ideologies hold sway through terror that violently eliminates not only those who contest them, but those who hold them due to personal conviction, for conviction betrays the potential for criticism of the fiction. Terror in totalitarianism, by diminishing and subduing believers and destroying critics, creates supporters who have shed their legal rights and duties as citizens and their responsible freedom as moral agents. Totalitarianism seeks to destroy human individuality and ingenuity by rendering humans an animal species whose members are no more than specimens. Totalitarianism manifests evil by fostering unthinking obedience in banal, utterly predictable believers who serve as bureaucratic cogs in a machine of terror eradicating the humanity of everyone - including the rulers.

Arendt’s discovery of totalitarianism's threat to human individuality leads her to articulate the meaning of individuality and ingenuity, above all in political action. Arendt pursued these matters systematically in *The Human Condition* (1958). Humans live biologically in the cycles of daily metabolism and of birth, reproduction and death. Humans also live as individuals because they achieve identities through actions, words and deeds done before others, and their lives form narratives for those who witness them. In politics individuals shine forth through their public actions for their polity.

Arendt draws several crucial distinctions traceable to ancient Athens for understanding politics. People inhabit both a private realm as family members, where economic activities maintain life, and a public realm where they speak and act together as citizens. Human activity has three forms: labour - producing what must be consumed for life, such as food or wages; work - making enduring objects; and action - intervening in the flow of events, by which citizens display freedom and courage by facing their world's challenges. Arendt warns that, ever since the rise of market society, work and especially labour have dominated life with a corresponding eclipse of action, so that politics, even in democracies, is inexorably changing into economic administration while the shared public world, the space for action whereby individuals can appear, threatens to vanish.

**Suggested reading**

APA

Chicago

Harvard

MLA