

Telling Time Together: Hannah Arendt and the Temporal Condition of Human Beings in the World

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This paper is an analysis, via the thought of Hannah Arendt, of the temporal dimension of a life-world. The difference between worldly time and historical time is described, as are the various components of the phenomenon of worldly time. Although it is a rare occurrence, historically, for worldly time to “break down” and to go untold, Arendt certainly believed that worldly time had “stopped” in her lifetime, and at the end of her life she was wrestling with the question of “how to re-start time”. This question is perhaps even more pressing today. Although Arendt never gathered together all the threads in her thought concerning worldly time, this paper is a preliminary effort to do just that.

Introduction

Near the end of Hannah Arendt’s “Preface” to *Between Past and Future*, there appears, it seems, a most curious contradiction in her thought. On the one hand she straightforwardly claims that the “gap between past and future” which she had just been describing was an entirely mental phenomenon, or an experience humans have only when we are thinking.¹ As she explicitly states, “applied to historical or biographical time none of these metaphors can possibly make sense because gaps in time do not occur there”.² On the other hand, and on the very next page, she asserts that “the thread of tradition” has broken, and with the cutting of this thread “the gap between past and future ceased to be a condition peculiar only to the activity of thought and restricted as an experience to those few who made thinking their primary business. It became a tangible reality and perplexity for all; that is, it became a fact of political relevance”.³

Strikingly, this apparent contradiction between a gap in time as a purely mental phenomenon and a gap in time as a “tangible reality” appears again in Arendt’s final, unfinished work, *The Life of the Mind*. At the conclusion of volume 1, “Thinking”, she was again writing of the experience, when thinking, of a gap between past and future, and again she insisted that her metaphorical descriptions of this experience were valid only in the realm of thought. In her words from that text, “applied to historical or biographical time, these metaphors cannot possibly make sense; gaps in time do not occur there”.⁴ What then to make of the fact that two pages later she was writing of “a fragmented past”,⁵ and that the last twelve pages of volume 2, “Willing”, are devoted to the political problem of “how to re-start time within an inexorable time continuum?”⁶ What to make of the fact that in these pages she explicitly identified a “hiatus between a no-more and a not-yet”,⁷ and turned her attention toward “such gaps of historical time”.⁸

I suggest this apparent contradiction points to one of Arendt’s most profound insights into the temporal condition of human beings in the world. This insight has to do with the lived experience of

¹ Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought* (New York and London: Penguin Books, 1993), 13.

² Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 13.

³ *Ibid.*, 14.

⁴ Hannah Arendt, *The Life of the Mind: Vol. 1, Thinking* (San Diego, New York, and London: Harcourt, Inc., 1978a), 210.

⁵ Arendt, *The Life of the Mind: Thinking*, 212.

⁶ Hannah Arendt, *The Life of the Mind: Vol. 2, Willing* (San Diego, New York, and London: Harcourt, Inc., 1978b), 214.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 204.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 205.

a *worldly* hiatus between a past that is no longer and a future that is not yet.⁹ To put it in language Arendt did not use, this gap between past and future is best characterised as *a time in which worldly time is not being told meaningfully together*. The key to unlocking her apparent contradiction is that in her thought worldly time is not the same as historical time. While it is true that occasionally she, or perhaps one of her “Englishers”,¹⁰ used the words “historical time” to refer to it, worldly time is a different temporal modality to history, albeit sharing with history the fact that it is far more expansive than any one individual’s lifetime. To put it simply, I am suggesting that worldly time is the temporal dimension of a life-world, one inter-subjectively shared by a diverse collection, indeed, a plurality, of inhabitants. Furthermore, I believe that if we take the reality (and perplexity) of worldly time as the standpoint from which to evaluate Arendt’s apparent contradiction, the contradiction evaporates, although admittedly it leaves in its place a host of questions concerning worldly time. Before addressing those questions, though, let me return to Arendt’s apparent contradiction in order to explain more fully the claims she was making.

Regarding the mental phenomenon of the gap between past and future, with Arendt I assume that anyone who has ever truly been lost in thought has indeed experienced the *nunc stans*, the standing now, or a moment of whatever duration in which they did not experience the passage of time.¹¹ Instead, and for however long as they were thinking, they were participating in a timeless present. They were, in that moment, “outside” of any temporality associated with movement, and were in this sense experiencing a gap between past and future. It is, in short, a real phenomenon. Likewise, with Arendt I am in full agreement that gaps in time do not and cannot occur in history *as history is currently conceived* (in western culture). The issue to keep in mind, however, is that history as currently conceived is inseparable from calendar time. Arendt made this point forcibly in her essay “The Concept of History”, in which she wrote, “this is what is manifestly expressed in our calendar; *it [our calendar] is the actual content of our concept of history*”.¹² To elaborate on her point, while it is perhaps possible for there to be weeks or months in which nothing much happens of worldly significance, nevertheless those weeks and months are present in the historical record. Put differently, in our time no stretch of time is unaccounted for: every minute, every hour, every day and week is included, its existence affirmed, if only by a series of meaningful numbers. From the perspective of the world we share in common, however, a series of meaningful numbers is scant meaning indeed. They reveal nothing of the fabric or texture of human life lived in that world at that time. They do not tell the story of any words or deeds that emerged and endured in the world within the span of that numbered sequence. Yet such stories, told together, are the very stuff of worldly time. It is when *they are not told* that a gap opens up between a world’s past and future; no matter how well-numbered are the days of that gap, what is missing is a meaningful account of the events of that world’s past and present, as well as a modest array of meaningfully imagined futures into which the living inhabitants of that world can promise themselves.¹³ The need for worldly time to include such anticipated futures is yet another important characteristic of worldly time that distinguishes it from historical time: worldly time includes shared retentions and protensions—on an epic scale. Again it is when these memories and future anticipations go missing that a gap between past and future opens up in worldly time. With Arendt I believe they truly have gone missing, that the reality of a gap between worldly past and worldly future is a fact of political relevance.

⁹ Hannah Arendt, *Essays in Understanding: 1930-1954*, ed. Jerome Kohn (New York: Schocken Books, 2005a), 158-160.

¹⁰ Jerome Kohn, “Introduction”. In Hannah Arendt, *Responsibility and Judgement*, ed. Jerome Kohn (New York: Schocken Books, 2003), xxxi.

¹¹ Arendt, *The Life of the Mind: Thinking*, 210.

¹² Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 75, emphasis added.

¹³ Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, Second Edition (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1998), 247.

Contra Arendt, I do not believe this fact become a tangible “reality and perplexity for all” some decades ago, as she asserted. And I think this was primarily because *watches and calendars kept on functioning*. People still believed, with justified confidence, that they knew what hour and what day it was. The realisation that the meaningful content of the days of our world is increasingly resembling a kind of homage to the absurd is *only now* slowly beginning to dawn. For example, banks that have engaged in unscrupulous lending and investment practises are rewarded, while increasing numbers of people are made jobless, homeless, and desperate? This perplexing reality is beginning to sink in, and this “sinking in” may well foretell the survival of worldly time. In Arendt’s words, “no human world destined to outlast the short lifespan of mortals within it will ever be able to survive without [people] willing to do what Herodotus was the first to undertake consciously—namely...to say what is”.¹⁴

In part because it is, from my perspective, so timely, in the following pages I seek to provide a phenomenological sketch of Arendt’s worldly time, or of the temporal condition of human beings in the world.¹⁵ Although Arendt never explicitly discussed this temporal condition, time and again she alluded to it—in terse, dense ways. Perhaps one reason she never focused directly upon it is that tellers of worldly time are, almost simultaneously, thinkers, judges, makers and actors; they do not fit neatly into any division within or between the *vita contemplativa* and the *vita activa*. More likely, to my mind, she did not analyse at length worldly time because it was so very close to home, a “something” through which her own “who-ness” was revealed. Given that this conundrum can never be resolved, however, I will begin with what is incontrovertibly to hand: four dense quotes from Arendt. Taken together they begin to tell the story of the telling together of worldly time.

The story reveals the meaning of what otherwise would remain an unbearable sequence of sheer happenings.¹⁶

Everybody who tells a story of what happened to him [or her] half an hour ago on the street has got to put this story into shape. And this putting the story into shape is a form of thought.¹⁷

The ‘completion,’ which indeed every enacted event must have in the minds of those who then are to tell the story and to convey its meaning, eluded them; and without this thinking completion after the act, without the articulation accompanied by remembrance, there simply was no story left that could be told.¹⁸

Without [that]...which selects and names, which hands down and preserves, which indicates where the treasures are and what their worth is—there seems to be *no willed continuity in time and hence, humanly speaking, neither past nor future*.¹⁹

While all four quotes are deeply significant illuminators of worldly time, I need to own up to the exercise of my editorial discretion. I removed the word “tradition” from the last quote and replaced it with [that]. I did so because with Arendt I fully agree that the thread or chain of the western cultural tradition has been broken and cannot be mended.²⁰ Nevertheless, and again with Arendt, I do not believe the human capacity for judgement has been eradicated. Nor do I believe that the human capacity to tell stories and preserve them has evaporated. Instead, I think Arendt’s insights

¹⁴ Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 229.

¹⁵ See Paul Ricœur, “Action, Story and History—On Re-reading *The Human Condition*”, *Salmagundi* 60 (1983), 60-72, for the first, and to this day one of the very few, analyses of “the most enduring features of the temporal condition of man [sic]” (60) in Arendt’s thought.

¹⁶ Hannah Arendt, *Men in Dark Times* (San Diego, New York, London: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1995), 104.

¹⁷ Hannah Arendt, “On Hannah Arendt”, in *Hannah Arendt: The Recovery of the Public World*, ed. Melvyn A. Hill (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1979), 303.

¹⁸ Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 6.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 5, emphasis added.

²⁰ On the breaking of the thread of tradition see Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 25, and Arendt, *The Life of the Mind: Thinking*, 212.

into the complexities of “willed continuity in time” transcend the function of tradition and are applicable to any attempt to tell worldly time together. As she put it at the conclusion to “Thinking”, in the absence of tradition what is lost is the “certainty of evaluation”.²¹ I take her point to be that the old evaluative forms and moulds, the old yardsticks may be gone, but the capacity to evaluate anew is not gone. The capacity to select and name anew, to tell the story of different treasures and their worth—this human capacity remains. The question is: will we exercise it? Put differently, what I have learned from Arendt is that in the absence of tradition it may well only be through *enduring stories* that meaningful continuity in worldly time can be created and maintained. What is noteworthy is that such stories are a tangible bridge between the *vita contemplativa* and the *vita activa*.

To explain briefly, no story about the world can be told unless and until a) an action or event occurs in the world *and* b) someone has *thought* about it, *judged* it worthy to be told, and then *willed* themselves to bring it into being through the *physical act* of setting it down on a page, or painting it, or sculpting it, or otherwise “reifying” that story into a durable, shareable object.²² The importance of such a combined mental and physical effort on the part of human beings lies in the fact that without such efforts, “the living activities of action, speech, and thought would lose their reality at the end of each process and disappear as though they had never been”.²³ In other words, unless the “unbearable sequence of sheer happenings” which we experience fleetingly as participants and spectators in the world is told meaningfully together *and* tangibly added to the world in common, then we lose those happenings, meaning is evacuated from our worldly present, and we can neither envision nor promise ourselves to a shared, meaningful future. Or, without the presence of physically enduring manifestations of “willed continuity in time”, worldly time is at risk, and so too is meaningful human life.

That is, if our individual lifetimes are to be understood as unique, meaningful lives lived out in a rectilinear line from birth to death, and if the world in which we dwell is to include meaningful, as opposed to sheer and unrelenting, change, then there must be a more or less stable backdrop to our lives, against which we each stand out as “unique, unexchangeable, and unrepeatable entities”.²⁴ This “backdrop” is the meaningful knitting together of disparate lives, words and deeds into a coherent and *temporally expansive* whole. Crucially, it is only within such a whole that any new event can even be recognised *as* a new, unexpected event. Apart from some kind of a meaningful whole, that is, each birth, each life and each event, whether word or deed, would simply be another meaningless component in an ongoing welter of “sound and fury, signifying nothing”.

One problem identified by Arendt is that worldly time is always precarious, always “out of joint”.²⁵ The crux of the issue, as mentioned above, is the fact that the content of worldly time consists to a large extent of a variety of human actions, or words and deeds. These actions are, in and of themselves, frail to an extreme. By themselves they leave behind nothing, and are thus utterly dependent for their meaningful temporal endurance in a world on those who tell their stories and put them into reified form. *That someone will tell the story of a worldly event is never certain. Nor is it certain that, once reified, the meaning of that event will in fact live on in the world.* As Arendt put it in *The Human Condition*, “the materialization [actions] have to undergo in order to remain in the world at all is paid for in that always the ‘dead letter’ replaces something which grew out of and

²¹ Arendt, *The Life of the Mind: Thinking*, 212.

²² Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 95. See also Sara Heinämaa, “Future and Others”, in *Birth, Death, and Femininity: Philosophies of Embodiment*, ed. Robin May Schott (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2010), 38ff & 147.

²³ *Ibid.*, 95.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 97.

²⁵ Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 192; Hannah Arendt, *Responsibility and Judgement*, ed. Jerome Kohn (New York: Schocken Books, 2003), 28; Hannah Arendt, *The Promise of Politics*, ed. Jerome Kohn (New York: Schocken Books, 2005b), 203.

for a fleeting moment indeed existed as the ‘living spirit’”.²⁶ But the “dead letter” which is a reified, materialised story is not necessarily entirely dead. Rather, it is possessed of “a deadness from which it can be rescued...when the dead letter comes again into contact with a life willing to resurrect it, although this resurrection of the dead shares with all living things that it, too, will die again”.²⁷ In his “Introduction” to *The Promise of Politics* Jerome Kohn describes most eloquently what is at stake in this relational process. “What is crucial for Arendt is that the specific meaning of an event that happened in the past remains potentially alive in the reproductive imagination. When that meaning, however much it may offend our moral sense, is reproduced in a story and experienced vicariously, it reclaims the depth of the world. Sharing vicarious experiences in this manner may be the most efficacious way of becoming reconciled to the past’s presence in the world”.²⁸

At a minimum it would seem that in order for worldly time to be kept alive there must be a rather constant stream of newcomers to the world who are willing to resurrect, with their own living spirit, dead letter stories of worldly deeds. I suspect that such commitment to (and experience of) keeping “the depth” of their world’s past alive flows into the present and is made manifest in those witnesses’ willingness and ability to identify current words and deeds which are deserving of their own stories and materialisations. This is not an easy endeavour. Tellers of meaningful worldly time must confront what is all too often an unbearable sequence of happenings, and by means of thinking completion put those happenings into shape. They must dare to select and to name, to honour that which is praiseworthy and to condemn that which is not. They must judge what to preserve, what to hand down. In so doing, they wilfully, meaningfully re-constitute a world’s past and present, thereby affording the possibility, though not the certainty, of meaningful temporal continuity into the future.

As I conclude this brief sketch of worldly time, I cannot help but note that as I write these words great swathes of Cambodia and Thailand are under water. Wall Street is occupied, and the Great Wall of China is crumbling in spots. It is a matter of public record that a recent recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize has been ordering assassinations rather regularly—and they are being carried out as per his orders. Amidst this welter of happenings I remember and extend these words from Adrienne Rich: “when the staves of history fall awry and the barrel of time bursts apart, some turn to prayer, some to poetry”, yet others begin to tell the splinters of their time together again.²⁹ To put it in the terms of this colloquium, whether they know it or not, those tellers of worldly time are responsible for keeping alive the temporal dimension of their life-world. Theirs is an always uncertain, always epic endeavour.

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²⁶ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 95.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 169.

²⁸ Kohn, “Introduction”, xxi-xxii.

²⁹ Adrienne Rich, *What is Found There: Notebooks on Poetry and Politics* (New York and London: W. W. Norton & Company, 1993), 115.