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## Human Condition

Nathanaël Wallenhorst<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract** This article examines the human condition in the Anthropocene, based on the definition given by Hannah Arendt in *The Human Condition* (1958). That book was particularly fitting in the age of modernism. Today, however, the dawn of the Anthropocene appears to necessitate a shift in the way in which we view humanity. This article proposes the notion of the ‘human adventure’, rooted in the whole adventure of living beings on this planet, and highlighting the uncertain fate that humanity currently faces.

Arendt wrote *The Human Condition* in the wake of her three volumes on *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. After addressing the ‘banality of evil’, she wrote a book that is seminal in anthropology, attempting to define the absolute essence of the human condition. This work includes a number of opposing terms. The human condition is marked by *vita activa* (active life; the term serves as the title for the German translation of *The Human Condition*). *Vita activa* is differentiated from *vita contemplativa* (contemplative life), the latter being the subject of her final work, *The Life of the Mind*, which was unfinished at the time of her sudden death. Two further terms which are mutually opposing, but complementary, form the backbone of *The Human Condition*: the private sphere (economic) and the public sphere (political). These two concepts frame Arendt’s critique of the modern age, in which the private sphere appears to dominate the public sphere. Among other causes, this reflects the dominance of interest over disinterested selflessness. Against this dichotomy between the private and public spheres, Arendt constructed a three-pronged anthropological model of humans’ relationship to the world: the labour of the *animal laborans*, the creativity of the *Homo faber*, and the action of the *zôon politikon*.

One of Arendt’s criticisms of the modern age is that ‘[creative] work has become [fruitless and unending] labour’ (1958, p. 142). The difference between labour and work is the permanence of the product of work (an enduring creation). By lasting, work contributes to the creation of a world, in which all humanity shares. Arendt decries the fact that we have become a consumer society: instead of using the enduring products of work, we consume the fleeting and disposable products of labour. Thus, instead of building a world in which we can all live, we are depleting natural resources and destroying our world – the one and only world in which humanity can exist (Arendt, 1958, p. 31).

Arendt’s critique of the modern age is particularly interesting for our purposes. Through her lens, we can see how the hegemony of economics, unrestrained by political regulation, has led us to the jaws of the Anthropocene. The third aspect of Arendt’s model – action – is somewhat enigmatic. In Arendtian thinking, there is no greater human activity than cooperative action through dialogue. Action and words are the two facets of the supreme political activity. Arendt

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has a very high opinion of the actions of which humans are capable. She presents action as part of the solution to the dominance of the private sphere over the public. She seems to have drawn inspiration for her concept of ‘action’ from the roots of the American Revolution – the bloody conflict was preceded by a period of ideas stimulated by both French and British thinkers, so the seeds were sown in a democratic, non-violent fashion. Arendt’s concept of action is a beacon of hope, the counterpart to the darkness of totalitarianism. In Arendt’s own words, action is a miracle. Its power lies in its fleetingness. Action endures only when human beings work together. An action is an event in the public sphere, born of our shared existence (the awareness of which is at the heart of pluralism). Action has been lacking throughout the modern era, and that lack of action has led us, inescapably, into the Anthropocene. Today, then, is the notion of the human condition still apt and applicable, despite the fundamental importance of action, facilitating the emergence of the political (which has been in such short supply in the modern era)? Now that we are in the Anthropocene, ought we to re-examine how we think about humanity?

The geoscientific research on the beginning of the Anthropocene published over the past two decades reframes the notion of the human species in a particularly naturalist fashion. The defining feature of naturalism is that, instead of individuals with free will, it views us as a united species with a simple history. This simplistic approach appears always to underlie research in earth sciences on the Anthropocene. It is linked partly with the notion of human nature and the naturalisation of technology in the guise of progress (Bonneuil, 2014; Federau, 2017; Wallenhorst, 2019, 2020). The notion of humanity is contingent upon that of the human condition. Now more than ever, as we face the Anthropocene, we need a clear understanding of that contingency, to counter the anthropological oversimplification in many geoscientific works. For her part, Hannah Arendt, given her experience in detention camps and her first-hand knowledge of the Nazis’ bid to radically transform humanity, was particularly circumspect in regard to human nature, preferring to focus on the dimension contingent on the human condition (Arendt, 1948, p. 277). However, thinking about humanity without reference to the idea of human nature is problematic – it does not acknowledge the influence of an external force (nature) on humanity. For our part, we believe that the living world is an essential element, which must be taken into consideration when thinking about humanity in the Anthropocene. Recognising our place in the living world could hold the very key to humanity’s survival. Without a solid grounding in the unified fabric that is the living world, we cannot hope for long-term survival in the biosphere (Cabanes, 2017; Weber, 2016, 2017; Weber & Kurt, 2015; Flahault, 2018; Pelluchon, 2015; Servigne & Chapelle, 2017). The vast-scale destruction of biodiversity going on today, and the conception of humans as being in some way removed from the rest of the living world, are among the major problems on which the Anthropocene shines a light. It is important that our view of humanity be based on reference to that living world.

Another major feature of the Anthropocene will have a long-lasting impact on the human condition. We face a future marked by uncertainty (more so now than at any other time in human history): an ‘adventure’ in a very real sense. Here, the term ‘human adventure’ could refer simultaneously to such awareness of humanity’s place in the living world, and to the degree of uncertainty as to humanity’s future on the planet. The idea of adventure is representative of the threat we face, and emphasises that we share a common destiny, in relation to the uncertainty the future holds. The whole of humanity is united in facing our uncertain fate, though we are still conscious of the social, cultural and political differences between us. If we take this view, then the definition of humanity is no longer intrinsic and static; rather, we are defined by what we can become, and what we make of ourselves within our environment.

The term ‘adventure’ derives from the Latin *adventura*, meaning what is to come, and *advenire*, meaning to happen or occur. Other derivatives of *advenire* include *advena* (foreigner) and

*adventicius* (what comes from outside, what occurs). The current use of the term ‘adventure’ includes the idea of uncertainty and danger, in connection with the environment in which the adventure is happening. Adventure contains intrigue: an event with an unknown outcome. Today, we face uncertainty as to what will become of humanity, given the point of no return marked by the Anthropocene. An adventure is an experiment (from the Greek *experior*, to put to the test). The word ‘human’ has the same etymological root as *humus*: the earth. *Humus* imbues us with *humanitas*, human nature. Human nature comes partly from the soil, as we are affected by the soil we tread. In biological terms, we come from the earth, and the matter that makes us up is part of a never-ending cycle that includes humanity and our planet. Humans are defined, in part, by our relationship with the earth – with *humus*. The word *humus* itself refers to the layer of natural compost on the earth’s surface resulting from decomposition of organic matter. The product of death (decomposition) gives rise to life (germination). Human nature is also partly connected with the humility that comes of knowing our own existence is finite. Both *humus* and *humilitas* define *humanitas*. The terms ‘human’ and ‘terrestrial’ come from two different Latin roots, with the same meaning: Earth.

As humans, we need to learn to deploy the power we hold in a different way, and the first step is by acknowledging our own finitude, and that of our environment. The concept of the ‘human adventure’ includes what we are in the process of becoming. The anthropological bases of that notion share much with the work of the anthropologist François Flahault, who breaks with the modern essentialisation of the individual (Flahault, 2018, p. 38). We believe it would be interesting to think of humanity, in the Anthropocene, in relation to the idea of the human adventure rather than that of the human condition. ‘Human nature’ refers to an essence; the ‘human condition’ is contingent on present circumstances. The idea of the ‘human adventure’ includes the uncertainty of the future, and the possibility of altering the characteristics on which that future is contingent (notably modifying the earth’s systems, or even, potentially, altering humanity’s own biological make-up).

The Anthropocene represents a new beginning for humankind, because the world – so important to Arendt’s description of the human condition – is under threat. Indeed, for Arendt, the world is a crucially important element of the human condition. Firstly, it accommodates human creations, and measured against the timescale of the world, humans are able to appreciate the fleeting nature of their own existence. Secondly, the world is the shared space in which action takes place. The world has existed for millions of years before we were born, and will survive long after we are gone. It is perennial. In speaking of the world, Arendt uses the metaphor of a tent pitched on the surface of the planet, accommodating all humanity. If we extend that metaphor, we can clearly see that, as the earth is constantly shifting, the tent will be shaken, and will require a degree of flexibility in order to adapt and remain standing. The Anthropocene alters the human condition. In this new geological period, the notion of the human adventure that we propose (defined in greater detail in the article so titled) becomes appropriate.

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