

*The
Human
Condition*

BY HANNAH ARENDT



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Action

pearance. This insertion is not forced upon us by necessity, like labor, and it is not prompted by utility, like work. It may be stimulated by the presence of others whose company we may wish to join, but it is never conditioned by them; its impulse springs from the beginning which came into the world when we were born and to which we respond by beginning something new on our own initiative.¹ To act, in its most general sense, means to take an initiative, to begin (as the Greek word *archein*, “to begin,” “to lead,” and eventually “to rule,” indicates), to set something into motion (which is the original meaning of the Latin *agere*). Because they are *initium*, newcomers and beginners by virtue of birth, men take initiative, are prompted into action. [*Initium*] *ergo ut esset, creatus est homo, ante quem nullus fuit* (“that there be a beginning, man was created before whom there was nobody”), said Augustine in his political philosophy.² This beginning is not the same as the beginning of the world;³ it is not the beginning of something but of somebody, who is a beginner himself. With the creation of man, the principle of beginning came into the world itself, which, of course, is only another way of saying that the principle of freedom was created when man was created but not before.

It is in the nature of beginning that something new is started

1. This description is supported by recent findings in psychology and biology which also stress the inner affinity between speech and action, their spontaneity and practical purposelessness. See especially Arnold Gehlen, *Der Mensch: Seine Natur und seine Stellung in der Welt* (1955), which gives an excellent summary of the results and interpretations of current scientific research and contains a wealth of valuable insights. That Gehlen, like the scientists upon whose results he bases his own theories, believes that these specifically human capabilities are also a “biological necessity,” that is, necessary for a biologically weak and ill-fitted organism such as man, is another matter and need not concern us here.

2. *De civitate Dei* xii. 20.

3. According to Augustine, the two were so different that he used a different word to indicate the beginning which is man (*initium*), designating the beginning of the world by *principium*, which is the standard translation for the first Bible verse. As can be seen from *De civitate Dei* xi. 32, the word *principium* carried for Augustine a much less radical meaning; the beginning of the world “does not mean that nothing was made before (for the angels were),” whereas he adds explicitly in the phrase quoted above with reference to man that nobody was before him.

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which cannot be expected from whatever may have happened before. This character of startling unexpectedness is inherent in all beginnings and in all origins. Thus, the origin of life from inorganic matter is an infinite improbability of inorganic processes, as is the coming into being of the earth viewed from the standpoint of processes in the universe, or the evolution of human out of animal life. The new always happens against the overwhelming odds of statistical laws and their probability, which for all practical, everyday purposes amounts to certainty; the new therefore always appears in the guise of a miracle. The fact that man is capable of action means that the unexpected can be expected from him, that he is able to perform what is infinitely improbable. And this again is possible only because each man is unique, so that with each birth something uniquely new comes into the world. With respect to this somebody who is unique it can be truly said that nobody was there before. If action as beginning corresponds to the fact of birth, if it is the actualization of the human condition of natality, then speech corresponds to the fact of distinctness and is the actualization of the human condition of plurality, that is, of living as a distinct and unique being among equals.

Action and speech are so closely related because the primordial and specifically human act must at the same time contain the answer to the question asked of every newcomer: "Who are you?" This disclosure of who somebody is, is implicit in both his words and his deeds; yet obviously the affinity between speech and revelation is much closer than that between action and revelation,⁴ just as the affinity between action and beginning is closer than that between speech and beginning, although many, and even most acts, are performed in the manner of speech. Without the accompaniment of speech, at any rate, action would not only lose its revelatory character, but, and by the same token, it would lose its subject, as it were; not acting men but performing robots would achieve what, humanly speaking, would remain incomprehensible. Speechless action would no longer be action because there would no longer be an actor, and the actor, the doer of

4. This is the reason why Plato says that *lexis* ("speech") adheres more closely to truth than *praxis*.