



Between Past and Future

Hannah Arendt

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Arendt's penetrating observations of the modern world, based on a profound knowledge of the past, constitute a major contribution to political philosophy. In this book she describes the perplexing crises which modern society faces as a result of the loss of meaning of the traditional key words of politics: justice, reason, responsibility, virtue, and glory. Through a series of eight exercises, she shows how we can redistill once more the vital essence of these concepts.

Between Past and Future Details

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Milo says

Fairly easy to follow, compared to most philosophers. She's got some great ideas about her, though I didn't agree with everything per se. My favorite chapter was definitely "The Crisis in Education."

k.merlin Wizard says

Arendt's critique of Marx's "concept of history" is well worth checking out in this collection of essays.

Hadrian says

Arendt never ceases to impress me with the depth and clarity of her thought. Recommended to all.

Jeremy Tan says

j'aime surtout les chapitres sur l'histoire et l'autorité. ils m'ont bouleversé mes pensées là-dessus. néanmoins, à cause de mon niveau de la langue française, au niveau philosophique, je trouvais quelque lignes de pensées d'Arendt assez difficile à saisir... alors, selon moi il en necessite un bon connaissance de la philo avant d'entreprendre à lire/comprendre les textes!

Pascal says

I enjoy this obviously. A collection of essay which offers the reader more insight in how Arendt's theories can help us see problems with Being in Mass Society. Questions on freedom, science, culture, art, tradition and authority. I especially like her essay on Freedom, I think she really asks some provocative questions that challenge mainstream views and offer a more critical approach.

Mark Valentine says

[Preface:] Arendt introduces her rationale for the title using a parable from Kafka, a brilliant thought-problem in which "he" has two antagonists; one, the origin, pushes from behind and the other blocks the road ahead.

[1. Tradition and the Modern Age:] Arendt reviews in triptych form three 19th Century Writers who have sealed off the philosophical traditions started by Plato and his Allegory of the Cave: Kierkegaard, Marx, and

Nietzsche. She profiles the contributions each made--each quite independent of the others--in establishing new traditions of doubt, alienation, and utopia/dystopia.

[2: The Concept of History: Ancient and Modern:] Is History linear or cyclical? Whose facts will get selected for the narrative? Classic Arendt essay (written while she was writing *The Human Condition*, so the resemblance exists) in which she guides through ancient and modern histories only to have the final two pages rise up and slay.

From Herodotus and Thucydides, Arendt culls out the focus of the eternal return in the Greek world where immortality in great deeds was the focus of the histories; St. Augustine shifted the focus to linear, direct path, emphasizing historical narratives that helped the faithful find the narrow path. But when Arendt arrives at the Moderns, starting with Hobbes and Kant and Hegel, then Marx, she has plenty to write about, mostly eviscerating Marx.

Ultimately, she lands the reader back where she began, noting that historians can find any pattern in the details and they will still be right. But since humans act without ever knowing what will be the consequences of their acts, reading History to find predictions, even a sense of what to expect is fruitless. Better to read it for what it is and judge in the now, in the moment between past and future.

[3: What Is Authority?] Arendt's first step is to re-title this essay to 'What Was Authority?' since the three pillars of authority (religion, tradition, and authority) have deteriorated away to dust on a broken column. Most of the space in this essay she devotes to exploring how Plato and the Romans developed authority (not tyranny, not totalitarianism). My biggest revelation came near the end in which she explains that the Christian Church's doctrine of the afterlife has been adapted from the last book of Plato's *Republic*; in that chapter, Plato uses the Er-Myth as a means to control those citizens to act with goodness who were not persuaded from his teachings. Fascinating.

[4: What Is Freedom?] More distortion than clarification, the philosophers have given us, Arendt claims. Since the Greeks and the Romans had limited views of freedom (freedom as it allows for one to contribute to the polis or to the city), the Christians were the first to stress individual freedom. But Arendt stresses mostly in her essay how the will acts in free action; that is, how freedom is meaningless unless acted upon. To sum, we are only as free as our last actions.

[5: Crisis in Education:] Beginning with the premise that if one wishes to influence change in current culture, one must begin with education, Arendt outlines the importance of shunning assorted packages for reform and political charges using the students as shells for genuine learning. In some respects, this essay is conservative but, only in the sense of Postman's book, *Teaching as a Conserving Activity*. Ultimately, she is radical (neither liberal or conservative) in calling for education that is constantly renewing itself because natural depletion--old ideas die out and new ideas come along--so relax and get used to change.

[6: The Crisis in Culture:] Its Social and Political Significance} I appreciate how Arendt delineates between art and kitsch: "Mass society...wants not culture but entertainment, and the wares offered by the entertainment industry are indeed consumed by society just like any other consumer goods." She continues that the entertainment industry has its own metabolism, one that feeds on its subjects by devouring them. That's a harsh criticism for most of what pop culture offers but it is worth noting. Arendt argues that the permanence of humanities lies in their ability to reflect beauty.

It causes me to ask myself? Am I reading this book [whatever book at hand] in order to or for the sake of. If it is the former, Arendt saves a seat for me in the philistine section; if it is the latter, she may let me contemplate Beauty with her in the Humanities section.

[7: Truth and Politics:] Written in the same year that Arendt published *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, this essay shows me that she took the high road in all the criticism she received. In the final pages, she references how Homer exalted the Greeks and the Trojans, Achilles and Hector, and thereby raised the standard for epic literature in portraying both sides of the contest; in reporting and in public truth-telling (politics?), this is the first examples of how to show courage, regardless of the contestant.

She writes that deceit can tear a hole in the fabric of factuality; that to the code needs to be to tell the truth though the whole world may perish ("Fiat veritas, et pereat mundus"); that lies, like reasoning for the individual, gathers momentum when heard in the herd (see *Federalist Papers*, #49); and "factual truth informs political thought just as rational truth informs philosophical speculation."

First rule is never to lie to yourself. The rest is history.

[8: The Conquest of Space and the Stature of Man:] I found consistent themes in this essay that appeared in the final section ("The Vita Activa and the Modern Age") in *The Human Condition*, mainly her reference to Kafka's quote--"Man found the Archimedean point but he used it against himself; it seems that he was permitted to find it only under this condition"). Even though the publication date on this essay is from the 60s, it remains relevant today since we still reach into space, into the genome and into robotic fabrications. All of these scientific explorations are changing us, Arendt notes. To be cognizant of this process and know that the lever may shift the earth such that our world may implode or explode, that we may get lost in the immensity of the universe in the name of human curiosity requires that avoid living with fantasy of some utopia or that we avoid the past abuses in our history but that we live in the middle, between past and future.

Joseph Sverker says

I am simply impressed by Arendt. I don't her so much to be critical as to simply get immersed in her thinking and this book is almost written a little for that purpose. It is not at all a book where she revels in her own brilliance but it is a book where she is testing her thinking which is suppose to encourage the reader's own thoughts and it certainly does so for me. The writing can be somewhat dense at times and much knowledge is assumed and also some issues, like that of education is quite specific for the time of writing. But for all that even that piece of writing on education has much to say to a reader today, even though I'm even a Swedish reader and not an American (it deals with the American crisis in education as she sees it).

Many of the essays take the differences between Greek and Roman culture as a starting point and one certainly learn much about how different the mind set actually were. Being a theologian I also much appreciated Arendt's use of Augustine which feels interesting, relevant and fresh despite its age and being written by a political theorist. Her interpretation of how he introduced the dualism of the will into philosophy is very insightful and brings out, to my mind, a very obvious omission in the ethical theories of Socrates, Plato and Aristotle, namely that they assumed that if a person knows what is right that person will also act on it. But we all know that that is true (and they probably knew it too). What Augustine did with the help of Paul was to give a theoretical framework with how to deal with that difficulty, namely to split the will against itself. Arendt then goes on to show that we in a modern period so easily think of freedom in these Augustinian terms, but, as far as I understand her, she wants to show that there are other valid concepts of

freedom, namely the political kind, that a human is free to act. That essay On Freedom is absolutely brilliant and so is the essay On Authority which I think many who are acquainted with Foucault should read. Arendt makes a distinction between power and authority which would be interesting to see if it holds water in a poststructuralist, postcolonial context. She also argues that one can not only judge an event, or occurrence, simply by what functions it has. One must also see to what it is in itself, so for example she states that atheism is not a religion, even if it might share many of the same functions. They are different in themselves. This I found very refreshing, although I have found myself arguing that atheism is a religion.

This and many more points are almost unnervingly contemporary and what this book shows is that Hannah Arendt must have been one of the essential minds in the last century.

Cornelia says

La crise de l'education sur le systeme scolaire americain est une revelation. ou comment depuis plus de 65 ans rien a change. le systeme les castes. un avant propos pour regarder autrement les teen movies

Phil Overeem says

45 years after this edition was published, it seems we ignore both Arendt's main question--how do we negotiate the space between past and future?--but also the reasons why we can't always answer it (she would say "ever answer it") the way we traditionally have. Slowgoing but worth it.

Mchelle Bird says

Arent is brilliant and a badass woman with amazing style. She's iconic.

Clark Maddux says

My first time reading Arendt. I was quite taken with her essay on tradition and the impossibility of recovering the past, though as is often the case with mid-century continental writers, she seems to possess a superficial understanding of pragmatism.

James says

This is a great book to begin with when approaching Arendt. The short essays are manageable, but insightful and controversial. Arendt herself even said it was her best work.

haetmonger says

pretty great read, i must say. it's mostly stuff that has been covered elsewhere in her work, but this one covers different facets of her theory in 30- to 50-page-long essays, so i'd agree that it's probably her most approachable book.

as with most of her work, a lot of this book takes the form of a tour through the philosophical history of an idea (e.g. will, authority, freedom), with arendt providing commentary, almost like she's scribbling notes in the margins of philosophical history, indicating where she thinks philosophers went wrong, where they got it right, etc. her interpretation of that history is often really original, if occasionally rather strained.

5 stars. important political theorists aren't supposed to be this fun to read.

Paul says

I read this book because it was referenced by historians Timothy Snyder and Tony Judt in "Thinking the 20th Century." Hannah Arendt's name was familiar to me before as a 20th century thinker, but I had never read anything written by her.

Snyder also referenced Arendt in "On Tyranny" in regard to her views on tyranny, authority and freedom. For me, the word "authority" usually carries a negative connotation, i.e. the person or body who has power over you. For Arendt, it seems that authority is not necessarily some person and not necessarily something negative. In the third essay in this collection, she writes about authority as being a part of the Roman trinity (authority, tradition, and religion), and authority differs from a fleeting power because it has its roots somewhere in the past. The foundation was central to Roman thought, according to Arendt, and once something was founded, that meant that it would remain for all future generations, who would look back to it as an authority. Similarly, those who served in the Roman Senate were considered to be authorities by virtue of the age of their institution. The point that she makes by introducing the Romans is that ultimately, authoritarian governments are still bound by laws, whereas tyrannical governments rule at the whims of the tyrant.

There are many other interesting observations made throughout these essays and it's clear that not only did Arendt have a very sharp mind and was extremely well-read, but also she is able to write with a precision that does not cloud meaning or interpretation. If I could change one thing about this book, I would transliterate all of the Greek words and provide more detailed notes to explain the meaning of these words and phrases. Hopefully the editors of a future edition will take this into consideration.

Chedy Riahi says

[illegible]

[illegible]

god she's good

Diogo Pires says

Arendt é muito complexa e talvez uma das mais influentes e sábias pensadoras do séc. XX. A forma como discute teorias de Kant, Platão, Marx, etc é soberba.

Um livro muito importante para se compreender a política e o mundo ao longo de séculos de história. Continua e irá continuar muito actual.

Michael says

In this series of essays Hannah Arendt draws upon her deep understanding of the Western tradition to perform a phenomenological reading of politics and history. Though she does not seek some essential factor that defines history, politics, education or culture in the modern age, she does return to a set of themes drawn from Greek and Roman understanding of politics, art and judgment in order to shed light on the crises in understanding that have beset the current situation. For Arendt, performative action and the capacity to exercise judgment within the limits of the finite mark truly human activity that define what it means to have a history; in contrast, the modern age in its many guises seeks to obliterate judgment and action, and therefore history and culture through utopian political schemes, technological rationality and the reduction of the political to the social.

These essays are strong enough to stand up to readings by people familiar with the history of philosophy and Arendt's contributions to twentieth century thought, but they would also be accessible to a general reader who knows something of Western culture, but is not steeped in phenomenology and hermeneutics. For the most part (minus the essay on education), each essay stands up well for a twenty first century reader, as her diagnoses of the problems that beset the modern age have not gone away.
