



“The idea that only what I am going to make will be real – perfectly true and legitimate in the realm of fabrication – is for ever defeated by the actual course of events, where nothing happens more frequently than the totally un-expected.”
Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, p. 300

On the importance of reflection on the human condition

Introduction

Why do we keep thinking and writing about how to change organizations for the better, into an “ideal”? Knowing at the same time that we are often doomed to fail? Every day practice shows us that the ideal often doesn’t work out. Why do we keep doing it? Why do we build huge constructions that often we can not handle anymore, constructions that can become even destructive or violent? For me, recent developments in the financial world illustrate this painfully.

This question emerged in years of experience as manager, consultant and coach. I asked myself: wouldn’t it be wiser to take the actual situation, the human condition as a starting point?

That is how I came to one of the works of Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*. The work of the philosopher Hanna Arendt could be relevant to gain a deeper insight in the human dynamics that occur when people work together and to the possibilities and dangers that are attached to this dynamic. In *The Human Condition*, Arendt investigates one important aspect of the human condition: the active life. She distinguishes three fundamental activities, which she names labor, work and action.

My angle for this paper is the question how the insights presented in Hannah Arendt *The Human Condition* can help us to better understand current development in organizations, in order to deal with this in a more human way. I explicitly use the word “dealing”, not managing or handling. I will explore those three forms of activity and the way they are performed in the working place, the organization.

In coaching, we mainly reflect upon the active life, the work of people in organizations. Can the thinking of Arendt be helpful to reflect upon our work and how?

Context

Almost 30 years ago, I started a career which somehow always made the connection between work and study, action and reflection. Through the years, I kept being curious for the same things: What does work mean for people? How do they give meaning to it? How do they deal with complex questions? How do they learn in their work? Those questions have led me to the PhD that I started this year¹. They are an essential starting point in my research on the slow, natural learning of professionals. Learning that happens in encounter, in many situations, like teams, conversations, coaching, and training.

¹ A PhD/DBA program at the University of Humanistics in Utrecht, www.uvh.nl



This theme is pictured in a metaphor, an image in words: whitespace. Through the years, working with images has become an integrated source of wisdom and inspiration.²

"White space is empty space", once said a client to a graphic designer. He never forgot the words, because he didn't agree. He knew by experience that whitespace works, actively and passively, in images and in words. That is why painters and poets are familiar with this fact for centuries.

"White space is empty space". People working in organizations would often agree with this remark. Whitespace, whether it is in time, or in space, is empty, as in worthless, not productive. I disagree. Whitespace is room to leave matters undefined for some time, giving room to what emerges in the middle of difficulty and complexity. Complex situations can not be encountered in a purely analytic way. Often you need to slow down, to circle around an issue. In the talking about those issues new insights may rise. There is a strong tendency to "handle" complexity by way of control: procedures, laws, systems. Then the question is avoided: Do we want to look a dilemma right into the eye and endure the insecurity that is part of it, to find the best possible way to deal with the dilemma and if so, how do we do this? This room seems to be disappearing in organizations and in society in general. People at work, who have to deal with complex situations, have less and less opportunities for slowing down, to discuss and think about "slow questions"³. Searching the best way to deal with complexity, when academic and technical knowledge are not enough.

If there is no room to speak, the dominant discourse works as a prison. Speech is essential to research the complexity of the matter, to create new meanings in words and between the words, for emerging new knowledge. Whitespace then can work as room for performativity, as room for what is not defined yet, what is not predictable. How do people in work situations create room to hear themselves and others speak? How do they connect existential and moral learning processes in direct relation to technical and organizational questions?

Also as a researcher, I try to live by the motto: Practice what you preach. So during this last year I created my own white space in order to prepare this paper. I initiated two series of meetings with colleagues, professionals who are interested in Arendts thinking. Those conversations were facilitated by Imke Musterd, a philosopher and consultant who is very familiar with Arendts work. In the past year, there have been many evenings with passionate and fruitful discussions based on this book. I want to thank both Imke and my colleagues.

This paper is a result of the work in progress. Because it is facing a slow question, the making of it had its own rhythm and speed (sometimes to my own frustration). The Greek had the notion of *kairos*, everything at its given speed and time. I tried to live by that wisdom in the writing process.

². See: De stille kracht van transcendentie, Ina Brouwer, Ine van Emmerik a.o., 2007

³ An expression minted by Harry Kunneman in *Vorbij het dikke ik* (Beyond the fat ego). He considers reflection on those slow questions to be a learning process, next to the professional and academic ones.



Arendt's The Human Condition

Hannah Arendt is a political philosopher thinker with an interesting biography. Being born in Germany (1906), she studied philosophy there and had teachers like Heidegger and Jaspers. In the thirties she emigrated to France and later to the United States. She lived and worked there for the rest of her life, as a writer and professor, connected to a large group of American and European intellectuals, till her death in 1975,. She also became famous (some might say: infamous) because of her report on the Eichmann trials: "Eichmann in Jerusalem. A report on the banality of evil".

In the introduction of the Human Condition she describes what made her write this work, in 1958. In the 50's, she lived in a time that was characterized by the introduction of automation and the change in character of work. She was worried about the historical development of loss of the ability to speak about the things we can make. Connected to the loss of the capacity of men to start anew. Since men is creating things that he cannot handle, she proposes "to think what we are doing." ⁴

Arendt thinks that we can not say much about human nature (as an abstraction), but a lot about the human condition: the condition of life itself and everything that as an effect of human activity becomes part of that condition ⁵.

Key concepts in her work are plurality and natality. Talking about plurality she chooses to think about men, each with a unique human life and not Man, as an abstraction. She wants to think about men and his ability to start something new.

This concept of plurality is the basis of Arendt's thinking and it distinguishes her from other modern thinkers for whom unity is the starting point, leaving little room for the subjective experience. But it distinguishes her also from postmodern thinkers who question the modern unity-thinking and make the subjective experience even more apparent. By making individuality and plurality the central reference point from the start as essential treats of the human condition, she can give a whole new perspective and investigate what those treats mean for human relations. When you keep in mind that those ideas also form the basis of our organizations and the models that we use to plan and manage, one can understand how those new perspectives may help to understand our changing reality better and use the new possibilities of our times better. That is one of the reasons that Arendt's star is still rising in philosophical world.

She distinguishes three main fundamental activities: labor, work and action. They are fundamental because each of them is corresponding to one of the basic conditions under which life on earth has been given to man. Arendt describes them concise, so I will quote them:

Labor is the activity which corresponds to the biological process of the human body, whose spontaneous growth, metabolism, and eventually decay are bound to the vital necessities produced and fed into the life process by labor. The human condition of life is labor itself.

Work is the activity which corresponds to the unnaturalness of human existence, which is not imbedded in, and whose mortality is not compensated by, the species ever-recurring life-cycle. Work provides an "artificial" world of things, distinctly different from all natural surroundings. Within its borders each individual life is housed, while this world

⁴ Human Condition p. 5

⁵ Human Condition p. 10



itself is meant to outlast and transcend them all. The human condition of work is worldliness.

Action, the only activity that goes on directly between men without the intermediary of things or matter, corresponds to the human condition of plurality, to the fact that men, not Man, live on the world and inhabit the world. Plurality is the condition of human action because we are all the same, that is, human, in such a way that nobody is ever the same as anyone else who ever lived, lives or will live.”⁶

For action speech is essential, to be able to start new things: “no other human performance requires speech to the same extent as action”. And for speech there need be at least two people.⁷ This creates room for natality and creation, for the unpredictable that is essential for action.

Arendt describes the relations between the activities and the spheres or places where they take place. It forms another important and interesting aspect of this work. For the sake of this paper, I will not further go into it. I want to mention one important observation she makes: nowadays, the public space can not always be a room for action, like it was in the polis in Greek time. Then this space was available to only a limited privileged group of free man.

The forms of activity can be ordered in a frame like this:⁸

Human Condition	(Physical) Life itself	Worldliness – world of manmade artefacts	Plurality – living amongst men (not Man)
Quality	Biological process of the human body / maintaining the life of the species	Permanence; stable world that lasts beyond individual human mortality	Remembrance; existence in the eyes of other humans, history; ‘natality’
Human activity	Labor , leading to the cycle of production and consumption	Work , producing human artefacts that last in the world	Action , initiative for the sake of it, of beginning something new.
Process	Cyclic (forever beginning and ending), driven by necessity	Causal (beginning and end : artefacts are finished and remain in the world), driven by utility	Political : Free process, i.e. not driven by need nor aimed at utility.

⁶ Human Condition p. 7. Underscore by me.

Thinking she explicitly leaves out. In the introduction she states that knowing and thinking seem to have taken different routes. Another interesting facet. In later years, she wrote “Life of the mind”. I leave it to that.

⁷ Human Condition p 178 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?”

⁸ Table made by Imke Musterd, bold added by me.



Discussion

At my desk stands a little toy. I is a wooden spectator. The 'glass' is cut in many facets. When I look through it, I see the world in many small pieces that are turning around each other, like in a kaleidoscope. For me this book is also like a kaleidoscope. Arendt cuts many small facets in the glass to look at the outer world of human activity. They are related but at the same time apart. The image is constantly shifting too. It may be confusing, but it is respecting the complexity of life, of the human condition.

At first sight, it seems that Arendt creates a kind of closed order, a hierarchy of forms of activity. It also seems that she idealizes action, built on the image of the polis in the Greek world where free men could interact, which seems an elite activity with the eyes of today. But on second view, it is clear that she is building a dynamic structure to view human activity today. She clearly states in the beginning of her book that all three activities and their corresponding conditions are intimately connected with the most general condition of human existence: birth and death, natality and mortality. However, she says: "action has the closest connection with the human condition of natality; the new beginning inherent in birth can make itself felt in the world only because the newcomer possesses the capacity of beginning something anew, that is, of acting"⁹. (So the lines in the frame should be viewed as transparent.)

The book explores many aspects of this dynamic structure to view human activity. The exact classifying is not that important, it gets interesting where there are shifts or frictions between the different sorts of activities. I want to mention some.

Arendt describes how labor has moved from the private to the public space and has become more like work. The animal laborans (the animal that labors) is growing into the homo faber (man who is making). The loss of connection with the condition of life causes alienation. This reminds me of actual discussion of the growing distance between people as consumers of food and the chain of "production" of food.

The strength of labor as an aspect of active life is shown to me each time that the advice for coachees to start gardening or walking is turning out to be very stimulating.

There is also a movement where work shifts to labor. In many organizations the work of professionals is disintegrating into "hands", this is: it doesn't matter who is doing it, as long as it is done. Just like in Ford's early automobile factories.

What action actually is, where it can be observed, was a point of passionate discussion in the study-groups. We decided to take one example out of our own professional practice and describe the activities of the actor in this case in detail, in a Socratic way.

Naud works as a consultant for a city council. There were the annual discussions and trouble about the decisions on tariffs between the department of planning and control (Marrit) and the sector controller (Joke). Marrit is asked by her boss to write a memo with suggestions for better consideration. Joke doesn't react. I propose to Marrit (after consulting Joke) that I will describe Joke's vision in an alternative description of the process. Marrit halfheartedly agrees. Joke accepts this proposal and we make a description. Marrit gives comments on this description. There are no earnest objections. Now there is a proposal that is advocated by Marrit and Joke.

⁹ Human Condition p 9



The discussion of the case was even more interesting than the actual anecdote. It made us realize how there can only be instants of action, for instance when Naud takes the initiative to consult Joke and Marrit about other procedures. Or when Naud helps Joke to give words to her view on the matters.

It made me realize that the fact that, given his position, (partly he can freely decide what to do), Naud had the opportunity to act this way.

It illustrates how action is connected to speech, giving room to find words, to make a new begin.

It shows what the principle of plurality can mean in practice. In this case, each individual professional was given room to speak for themselves.

What could this mean for the practice of coaching?

There are two aspects that I want to distinguish: the work of the coachee and the work of the coach that is the subject of the coaching (in many of the cases).

In my view, there is always a dynamic relation between the two.

I will describe some cases out my own recent practice as a practical reference point to my reflections.

The first one is Els (48 years). She works as a manager in an institution for psychiatric care, since ten years. We start the coaching in the end phase of a burn-out. We discuss how through the years she lost contact with the two professions that she was trained in: art and psychiatric care. She started her work for this institution because she could make a combination of both. But eventually she grew into a management role. At the beginning she liked it, but gradually her span of control expanded and there was a growing pressure on the organization to work more following protocols with less people. Her creativity was less needed and she lost the individual contact with her clients. Slowly but clearly she lost her inspiration, had the feeling that she was not acknowledged for her contribution. A combination of a conflict with her manager and aggression by clients finally did the trick. To her own surprise she has to acknowledge the diagnosis burn-out. She is recovering of it and is, forced by her organization at start, by eventually more and more by her own will, working to find a new job.

The second one is Amanda (40 years). She is working as a HR-advisor in a non-profit organization. As an experienced consultant (she studied law) she knows of the dilemma's and pitfalls of her profession. But now she is confronted with one that she experiences to be particularly complex. As an advisor to the management, she sees her boss bending rules to her own advantage. This troubles her, for many reasons. It is her responsibility to ensure that applicable rules are carried out correctly. Apart from the organizational need for transparent practices of HR (even more painful for her) it is conflicting with her sense of justness. She confronts her boss with her observations, discusses them with her. She investigates whether she should report this to others responsible in management. There aren't. She is manager of her department, colleagues are juniors to her. So she has no peers to consult, either.

I ask myself, in view of Arendt's theory: is there room for the appropriate activity of coach and coachee, respecting the nature of the issue and the activity in the job that is addressed?



The story of Els describes how her work gradually becomes more like labor. She is forced to be “hands” of a process, not being able to express her abilities as a homo faber. On the other hand, aspects of her work that are more like action: interaction with her clients, respecting their own individual needs, meeting them without the need for immediate results. Both Els and her clients and her clients lose their individuality, the principle of plurality is being violated.

For me as a coach, there is a tension between what I consider that is needed and the actual situation. The organization hires me to be the coach of Els. So of course there needs to be thinking in end and means, of aiming at results: learning to find your way on the labor market, skills needed for job interviews, etc. But it may cause a friction when in my view it is necessary to leave the practicalities behind and research in an open conversation what is important for her in life. At that point, result is not the immediate aim, another speed would be appropriate.

The story of Amanda is an example of dilemmas that may rise for professionals in their work. A complex ethical issue is at stake, both coachee and coach will not be helped by pure analyzing and solving. Of course, analyzing the professional’s position, contemplating possible interventions and training helpful skills may be helpful, but mostly there is a need open space for speech, for action.

I have the feeling that coaching is often at stake when there is a friction in a specific aspect of the active life of the coachee, where there is a friction or an overload on one aspect. I am creating room for a conversation where “working” can take place, but where action is also possible. Creating room means trying to find a balance: what needs to be addressed, in what way?

Whitespace

In this paper I have circled around only a few aspects of the slow questions that I raised in the beginning, particularly the one: Can the thinking of Arendt be helpful to reflect upon our works as coaches and how?

Those questions need white space in themselves. Complexity always needs to be faced with the acknowledgement that “we are in trouble”, as Paul Cilliers puts it.¹⁰

So as a coach, I am in trouble. For me it is a form of creative confusion¹¹. I experience this as an appeal on me as a professional, a researcher and last but not least, as a human being. We know a lot about the active life that is concerned with labor and work. We are less able in the field of action. That is more difficult, partly because of its fragile, subtle nature. It can not be made!

However, this room for action in the sense Arendt describes it, is even more important in slow questions of ethics or conflict. Those questions need to take complexity into regard and give room for speech.

What do I find meaningful for my practice as a coach?

- Coaching can be a place where there is freedom of labor and work in a specific setting, for a set amount of time. This means: there is (partly!!) an absence of thinking in terms of goals and means.

¹⁰ Cilliers, Complexity and the post-modern.

¹¹ I discussed this in an earlier EMCC-paper in 2005: Inner diversity as a creative source.



- Coaching may create room for speech, this is: speaking with the possibility to start anew. To reveal yourself in your humanity, your unique life.
- There can be room to search for the appropriate speed ¹². Can things be sped up, or do they need slowing down, giving space to the difficulty of the matter?

Reflection in this paper didn't provide me a model for the creation of solutions, of answers to the questions that I raised. But it helps the awareness about "What we are doing". It is were ethics start. I consider this to be a form of learning, like Kunneman does. It stresses the importance of whitespace in working environments. Whitespace that is a "space of difficulty". Difficulty is part of the human condition, so why avoid it? Denying it may be denying a part of ourselves.

Ine van Emmerik, December 2008

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Musterd, Imke, Arendt, The Human Condition (abstract)

Ine van Emmerik (49) has degrees in Law and in Psychology. After more then twenty years as a manager and HR-consultant in several national companies (among others: KBB-HEMA and ABN-AMRO), she started her own business, Extravaleren, in 2000.

www.extravaleren.nl In her role as a business consultant, coach and career-counsellor she focuses in particular on the learning abilities of individuals and organizations and guides them to seek their inner wisdom.

This year she continued her ongoing research (action/reflection) on the subject "Natural ways of conversational learning by professionals in their work" in a PhD/DBA program. Two of the most recent articles that she wrote are titled: "The silent force of cooperation in a network group" and "Artful coaching". She is also participating in an international PhD program, based in Lissabon, on "Literacy of women in leadership".

¹² A term by Cilliers in "On the importance of a certain slowness", which also inspired me to the title of this paper.



Writing a resume

What needs to be done?
Fill out the application
And enclose the resume.

Regardless the length of life,
a resume is best kept short.

Concise, well-chosen facts are de rigueur.
Landscapes are replaced by addresses,
shaky memories give way to unshakable dates.

Of all your loves, mention only the marriage;
of all your children, only those who were born.

Who knows you matters more than whom you know.
Trips only if taken abroad.
Memberships in what without why.
Honors, but not how they were earned.

Write as if you've never talked to yourself
And always kept yourself at arm's length.

Pass over in silence your dogs, cats, birds,
dusty keepsakes, friends and dreams.

Price, not worth,
and title, not what's inside.
His shoe size, not where he's off to,
that one you pass off as yourself.
In addition, a photograph with one ear showing.
What matter is its shape, not what it hears.
What is there to hear, anyway?
The clatter of paper shredders.

W. Szyborska

The law of statistics are valid only where large numbers or long periods are involved, and acts or events can statistically appear only as deviations or fluctuations. The justification of statistics is that deeds and events are rare occurrences in everyday life and in history. Yet the meaningfulness of everyday relationships is disclosed not in everyday life but in rare deeds, just as the significance of a historical period shows itself in the few events that illuminate it. The application of the law of large numbers and long periods to politics or history signifies nothing less than the willful obliteration of their very subject matter, and it is a hopeless enterprise to search for meaning in politics or significance in history when everything that is not everyday behavior or automatic trends has been ruled out as immaterial.
Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, p. 42



Human Condition	Life itself (Physical)	Worldliness – world of manmade artefacts	Plurality – living amongst men (not Man)
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Hannah Arendt, The Human Condition, Active life