

## Standing in Time

In commemoration of the 50th anniversary of Hannah Arendt's dying day

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It is the beginning of August 2025. I am in Heidelberg. This city, located at the Neckar river in Germany, is known for its old university, which first opened doors in 1386. 540 years later, Hannah Arendt moved to this university town to pursue a doctoral degree under supervision of Karl Jaspers. And now, only a few months prior to the 50th anniversary of Arendt's death, I am climbing the stairs towards the crossing of the streets Schlossberg and Neue Schloßstrasse. At the top of this intersection is a plateau with small stones and grass. Somewhat hidden against a brick wall, a dark blue sign reads: "Here lived, from 1926 to 1928, Hannah Arendt."

What was Arendt's house during her doctoral years does not seem to exist anymore. The grass covered plateau marks the place where I assume the building used to be. Now, a car is parked on it. I take another look at the sign on the wall. It tells a brief version of Arendt's life story, condensed to a mere four sentences. I was eager to visit the 'Hannah Arendt Haus', as it is indicated on Google Maps. Yet, now that I am standing in front of the dark blue sign, I am unsure what I was expecting. Perhaps, naïvely, a sense of closeness, of feeling a past timeline intimately interweaving with mine (at the moment of writing, I too am a doctoral student, just six years older than Arendt when she moved to Heidelberg). But as I am standing in front of an absent house, I realise that I feel this closeness mainly when actually reading her works.

This is not surprising. After all, Arendt herself famously said that she wrote only to aid herself in understanding; had she had a better memory, she would not have turned to writing in the first place.<sup>1</sup> In other words, these texts are, although also subjected to various moments of editing<sup>2</sup>, intimately close to the thinking process of a single individual. At the same time, parallels can also be drawn to Arendt's understanding of the political. To Arendt, the political is the space of appearances. In this realm, people reveal who, rather than what, they are. This is done through action, of which speech seems to be

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1 See the conversation between Günter Gaus and Hannah Arendt from 1964 for the program *Zur Person*.

2 In some cases even heavily so, for instance the posthumously published edited volumes.

the most important element to Arendt.<sup>3</sup> The voice can disclose who one is. Building on that insight, Sigrid Weigel, for instance, takes this revelatory character of speech to turn to the sound of Arendt's own writing to examine "the specific historical and epistemological conditions from which her unique thinking emerged."<sup>4</sup> There is, in other words, an intimacy sounding through Arendt's texts.

Perhaps partly because of this, Arendt's writings remain a source of inspiration to many. Her continuous attempts of coming to terms with the world in which she lived demonstrates a courage in thinking and writing that I too keep being drawn to, not solely in light of my research, but certainly also because of the times in which I do my thinking. That is to say, I am working amidst ecological disarray and collapse, happening, among other things, due to a relentless exploitation of the earth's resources, driven by and fuelling a capitalist system that also propels the continuous exploitation of human labour, also for the ever faster consumption of various artifacts (such as clothing and mobile devices). Furthermore, along the rise of authoritarian governments, I notice an increasing intermingling of tech companies and politics. Horrifyingly, there are several wars, crimes against humanity and ongoing genocides (some aided by my governments), many of which unable to be understood without also taking the long arc of histories of empire, colonialism, and racial capitalism into consideration. Instead of retreating to some abstract world of ideas, attempting to take a firm stance in time, to remember pasts and anticipate futures, to think for oneself and above all, to come to terms with the world(s) in which one lives, is an example continuously set by Arendt in her own work.

Arendt not only demonstrated this courage in the topics, themes, and events she discussed in her writings, but also in her reflections on the activity of thinking as such. In her essay collections titled *Between Past and Future*, Arendt grapples with the question of what it means to attempt to come to terms with the world without having a prescribed toolbox to make sense of this space. Arendt names this the growing thinner of the thread of tradition, but this historical development seems to also underscore an epistemic and methodological premise from which Arendt departed: "indeed every new human being as he [sic] inserts himself between an infinite past and an infinite future, must discover and ploddingly pave it anew."<sup>5</sup> In other words, to Arendt, thinking as understanding is an experience that can develop "only through practice, through exercises."<sup>6</sup> To Arendt, it is everyone's task to come to terms with the world that was handed to them, to dare and really stand at that space between past and future. And since Arendt also famously

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3 Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, second edition (The University of Chicago Press, 1958).

4 Sigrid Weigel, 'Sounding Through – Poetic Difference – Self-Translation: Hannah Arendt's Thoughts and Writings Between Different Languages, Cultures, and Fields', in 'Escape to Life'. *German Intellectuals in New York: A Compendium on Exile after 1933*, ed. Eckart Goebel and Sigrid Weigel (De Gruyter, 2012), 56, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110258684.55>.

5 Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future. Eight Exercises in Political Thought* (Penguin Books, 2006), 13.

6 Ibid.

explained that every thought is an after-thought<sup>7</sup> (*nachdenken*), that it follows from experience, these practices in thinking demand a sensitivity for keeping real life experiences at their centre.

One of the epistemological and methodological lessons Arendt thus continues to teach me is that the thinking process is never finished. Consequently, it is not sufficient to only turn to Arendt's prior writings for the answers of current phenomena. Thinking as understanding urges one to take on that practice of thought again and again: "The following eight essays are such exercises, and their only aim is to gain experience in how to think; they do not contain prescriptions on what to think or which truths to hold."<sup>8</sup> This is courageous and requires a pause, a hesitation, or reservation, a moment of reflection in which one takes a moment to look around and examine what is going on. This might mean letting go of previous judgements to form a new one.<sup>9</sup> And while there are certainly many thematic parallels to be drawn between Arendt's work and current events, I believe taking Arendt's reflections on thinking as an activity serious requires not merely applying some of her ideas or conceptualisations to a new case, but to dare and step in time, between past and future, and to take up that dangerous activity of thought that can disrupt everything in order to come to terms with the world one finds oneself in now.

Still, I cannot help but be drawn to Arendt's essay *The Archimedean Point*, when I watch a documentary about a CEO of a big tech firm, in Spring 2025. In one of the film frames, a quote is visible behind a close-up of the documentary's main character. Spanning almost over the entire wall, it reads: "Give me a point to stand on and I will move the Earth." The quote is famously attributed to Archimedes and Arendt turned to this phrase to illustrate what was, to her, characteristic of the modern age, namely a sense of earth-alienation as the result of the application of universal laws to all life and happenings on earth. Through the invention of the telescope, one could take a point in the universe and look down on earth from there. This distancing means that an abstraction is taking place. Seen from afar, individuals disappear into a group. They become part of a species. And from this distance, it is not difficult to apply a processual thinking to this group, to predict their behaviour en masse. The rise of behavioural sciences and statistics is therefore, to Arendt, typical of the scientific and technological developments of the modern age. And while I believe Arendt should not be read as saying that the invention of the telescope is responsible for this, the idea that one could take distance from the earth, apply universal laws to it, and thereby categorise and control what happens on the planet is especially illustrated with this technological invention.

<sup>7</sup> Hannah Arendt, 'Thinking', in *The Life of the Mind*, ed. Mary McCarthy (Harcourt, Inc., 1971), 87.

<sup>8</sup> Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 13–14.

<sup>9</sup> And although Arendt could sound authoritative in her own writings at times, she also seems to embrace a sense of reserve when it comes to her own thinking: "I would like to say that everything I did and everything I wrote all that is tentative. I think that all thinking, the way that I have indulged in it perhaps a little beyond measure, extravagantly, has the earmark of being tentative" (Hannah Arendt, 'Hannah Arendt on Hannah Arendt', in *Thinking Without a Banister. Essays in Understanding, 1953-1975*, ed. Jerome Kohn chocken Books, 2018), 474).

As stated, the aforementioned can lead to a sense of earth-alienation. The application of universal laws demands a distancing through abstraction. Hereby, the experience of one's active life on earth is left out of sight. In other words, thinking about the earth through universal laws requires an abstraction that generalises experience and thereby leaves situated particularities out of sight. This is not only epistemologically misleading, as Arendt understood thinking to follow experience, but it also bears political consequences. It is in political action, in the appearance through speech and deed in a world shared with a plurality of others, that we both show who we are as well as become part of a political community. This twofold move of distinguishing and partaking is imperilled by a sole focus on looking at the world through the lens of what we can make and do, especially when this is coupled with notions of efficiency and progress.<sup>10</sup>

Therefore, to Arendt, and as she states rather forthrightly, in that essay *The Archimedean Point*, that "What is at stake is the very ethos, the ethics, of science – the conviction that whatever we can discover we shall, whatever we can make we must make".<sup>11</sup> Looking at the world merely through the eyes of *homo faber* risks imperilling the possibility of the political, of acting in concert on a shared world by having a plurality of perspectives present. Indeed, years before writing *The Archimedean Point*, Arendt already raised these concerns in the prologue to *The Human Condition*. She famously opens this book with a reference to the launch of the first Sputnik satellite. The public discourse following this event worried Arendt. She observed a desire to leave the earth. This concerned her. Not because it was now a possibility, but because the public discourse only focused on the fact that this was now possible, and not whether it should be possible. Additionally, what it might mean to leave the earth was discussed in mathematical formulas and technological capabilities, but not in political settings, that is to say, not through a plurality of perspectives from people who appear in front of one another in their shared world.

All this comes to mind when I watch that documentary about a big tech developer whose meeting room is adorned by Archimedes' quote. For Archimedes it was irrelevant where he stood, because he could move the Earth from any point. For what mattered from such a perspective was the functioning of the mathematical laws and universal processes. It is telling that a company thriving on the increased datafication of life, lives, and peoples, with the result of growing surveillance and intermingling between corporate and state power, and the exploitation of human labour and natural resources, has taken the quote by Archimedes as an epigraph. Simultaneously, one might say that amidst a racialised capitalist system, it is not surprising that a company adopts the perspective of

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<sup>10</sup> "The issue at stake is, of course, not instrumentality, the use of means to achieve an end, as such, but rather the generalization of the fabrication experience in which usefulness and utility are established as the ultimate standards for life and the world of men." (Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 157).

<sup>11</sup> Hannah Arendt, 'The Archimedean Point', in *Thinking Without a Banister. Essays in Understanding*, 1953-1975, ed. Jerome Kohn (Schocken Books, 2018), 417.

so-called homo faber to look at the world.<sup>12</sup> While I consider this nonetheless worrying, I am especially also concerned about the increasing presence of a sense of technological determinism in political conversations, and in research projects and the academy at large. Where much is talked about and researched into how digital technologies and practices of datafication can be made more ethical, just, and sustainable, the existential premise whether such technologies should be developed is very rarely questioned, let alone brought forward.

The response to such a questioning is not predetermined but raising it is a premise of creating space for political action. It was not the technological capability of being able to leave the earth that worried Arendt (after all, she understood humans to be conditioned beings). It was the fact that the political conversation was not being held. That is to say, a conversation with a plurality of perspectives that are not solely focused on technological capabilities, efficiency, or economical predictions of growth or progress. Datafication, the categorisation of things for the purpose of being calculated, predicted, manipulated, worked on, or stored away, is not a new phenomenon. The question is whether we wish to do this to the world, both in human terms as well as in light of the exploitation of the earth's resources that is required for such intensified datafication.

Such a question does not have an easy answer. But it demands a reservation. A moment of reflection, of pause, of not rushing along with the demands of big capital but taking a moment to stand in time, to orient oneself, to dare and look at what is happening, and attempt to come to terms with the world(s) one finds oneself in and the ones where we wish to work towards. Among the many things that Arendt's work has taught and still teaches me, it is both the methodological and epistemological importance of including manifold experiences and events in the thinking process, but also the necessity this has for the political, and thus ultimately for freedom. To Arendt, each new person needs to find their place in their current time, in that gap between past and future. Finding this place is that endless exercise in thinking and that all must partake in. The courage Arendt showed in taking up this task, time and again, is inspiring. In a moment of increasing intermingling between states, corporations, and public institutions, especially in terms of (big) tech, efficiency and fabrication seem to rule many conversations, also contributing to the growing datafication (and hierarchization) of lives. The importance of not retreating to some abstract realm of ideas but rather taking a firm footing in time, to not look away, as a thinker but above all as a political being, is one of the big lessons (and perhaps even demands) I still find in Arendt's work.

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<sup>12</sup> For further critical analysis of this, see for instance: Achille Mbembe, *The Earthly Community. Reflections on the Last Utopia*, trans. Steven Corcoran (V2\_Publishing, 2022)

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