

The Human Condition today**Tilburg University, Netherlands, 27 November 2019
Workshop report**

“The Human Condition today”: the title of this workshop is intriguing, as it opens itself for a twofold interpretation. Is the core interest *The Human Condition*, the book written by Hannah Arendt over 60 years ago and considered by some her *magnum opus*, and its relevance today? Or is it rather about discussing the human condition today in Arendtian spirit: our situatedness in the world; current political turmoil (including many dubious practices that have not much to do with the care of the world); digital technologies that change so many spheres of our life – even the distinction between the private and the public, so important for Arendt? But very soon it becomes clear that the one goes hand in hand with the other. This is because some politically acute challenges today call not for dogmatic, but for critical (and in an Arendtian sense: political) perspectives. Through mass media and, as of late, platform media, more people than ever seem to be informed about what is happening in the world. And actually, we could even say: in different worlds, since the earth, in spite of the decade long talk about globalization, remains a ground for many living spaces, which differ to a large extent in terms of political freedom, economic sustainability or interpersonal practices. In other words, they differ in terms of the human condition, in Arendt’s understanding of the human being as an infinitely conditioned being, conditioned by everything she encounters.

These concerns, so pressing in our times, brought together a group of scholars seeking to discuss our condition today, not so much with the aid of, as in a dialogue with Arendt’s reflections in *The Human Condition*. The workshop was organized by Sanem Yazıcıoğlu, an assistant professor at Tilburg University, who recently published on the relationship of action and violence in Arendt¹ and Martine Prange, whose recent contribution to the field of women philosophers studies concerned Iris Marion Young’s account of gendered movement in the context of philosophy of sports.² The event comprised two parts, with discussions at the round table providing a reflective introduction and an intellectual warm-up to the first in a bi-annual series of Hannah Arendt Lectures, organized by the research group Philosophy of Humanity, Culture and Ethics (PHC&E) at Tilburg University. The lecture was delivered by Peg Birmingham, a

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- 1 Sanem Yazıcıoğlu, 2019. Arendtian Beginning under the Threat of Violence, *Continental Perspectives in Community: Human Coexistence from Unity to Plurality*. In *Continental Perspectives on Community: Human Coexistence from Unity to Plurality*, edited by Chantal Bax and Gert-Jan van der Heiden, 79-91. New York: Routledge.
 - 2 Martina Prange, 2018. Iris Marion Young’s Contribution to the Philosophy of Sports. In *Women Philosophers on Autonomy. Historical and Contemporary Perspectives*, edited by Sandrine Berges and Alberto L. Siani (no page reference). New York: Routledge.

professor of philosophy at DePaul University, Chicago, well-known for her book *Hannah Arendt and Human Rights: The Predicament of Common Responsibility*.³

The contributors to the Round Table were Veronica Vasterling (Radboud University Nijmegen, Netherlands), Marieke Borren (Open University Netherlands), Maria Robaszekiewicz (Paderborn University, Germany), Bert van der Ven (Tilburg University), Max van der Heijden (PhD student at Tilburg University), Sanem Yazıcıoğlu (Tilburg University), and Martine Prange (Tilburg University). The contributions focused on different ways in which Arendt's political ontology inspires us today. Two important reflections underlined the discussion, the first one being the current potential of Arendt's thinking from different angles, engaging with different philosophical traditions and referring to different issues of political and existential relevance today. There is a tendency to read Arendt as a representative of particular theoretical traditions, especially as a phenomenologist. However, while phenomenological clarifications help Arendt to look at the same thing from different perspectives, confining her reflections to phenomenology (or *belonging* to any other tradition) amounts to a reductive appropriation of her thought (Borren). Arendt's way of thinking can be seen as opposed to academic thinking and common divisions between academic disciplines. Arendt, in a unique way, appreciates the world as a ambiguous phenomenon: while the default mode of academic thinking consists in searching for solutions, answering questions and eliminating paradoxes, Arendt's way of engaging with the world appreciates its messy, contradictory realities, and focuses on *understanding* the world (Vasterling). The other important thread was the relevance of *The Human Condition* for reconsidering and appreciating the value of our earth- and life-bound condition, in light of new challenges we are facing, such as the necessity of rethinking the meaning of human relationality (Yazıcıoğlu), the fragility of human existence on earth under conditions of Anthropocene (van der Heijden), climate crisis and the related outburst of political action (Robaszekiewicz), digitalization and 'surveillance capitalism' (Pranger), or robotization of labor in times of global financial capitalism (van der Ven), in addition to the ones Arendt observed herself.

In her lecture following the Round Table entitled *Life and World in Hannah Arendt's Life of the Mind and The Human Condition*, Peg Birmingham meditated on the meaning and value of life and the earth for the human condition, against the background of the Anthropocene, the current rush to escape the earth and the tendency to turn any aspect of human affairs into algorithms. In an encompassing and careful reading of both *The Human Condition* and *The Life of the Mind*, Birmingham countered the prejudice that Arendt disdained life. Life – both human and animal – is always a worldly phenomenon, even if on an elementary level, never 'mere life', unless it is violently reduced to bare life under totalitarian conditions. Birmingham suggested that late capitalism may produce a similar danger: the reduction of human beings to biological life by rendering them superfluous.

³ Peg Birmingham, 2006. *Hannah Arendt and Human Rights: The Predicament of Common Responsibility*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

List of Participants

Prof. Peg Birmingham (DePaul University, Chicago, US)

Dr. Marieke Borren (University NL)

Max van der Heijden, MA (Tilburg University)

Prof. Martine Prange (Tilburg University, NL)

Dr. Maria Robaszkiewicz (Paderborn University, DE)

Dr. Veronica Vasterling (Radboud University Nijmegen, NL)

Dr. Bert van der Ven (Tilburg University)

Dr. Sanem Yazıcıoğlu (Tilburg University)

Marieke Borren / Maria Robaszkiewicz