Hannah Arendt and the Political Meaning of Human Dignity

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For respect for human dignity implies the recognition of my fellow-men or our fellow-nations as subjects, as builders of worlds or cobuilders of a common world.¹

—Hannah Arendt, The Origins of Totalitarianism

Human dignity was a central concern in the political philosophy of Hannah Arendt, but the meaning that she ascribed to it is notoriously ambiguous. In this essay, I seek to remedy this problem by offering a close examination of Arendt’s critical reflections on human dignity in her political philosophy. It is my contention that Arendt was not centrally concerned with the metaphysical question, “What is human dignity?”; she was concerned with the political question, “What does human dignity mean?” The first question seeks to understand the universal nature of human dignity independent of political experience; the second question seeks to understand the significance of human dignity within political experience. This shift in her perspective suggests that Arendt was moving beyond traditional essentialist accounts of human dignity and working out a political ontology of human dignity—an understanding of how human dignity is constituted in the public realm.² So what was the political meaning of human dignity for Arendt?

As I will argue, Arendt can be read as advocating a political understanding of human dignity that I will term conditional dignity.³ Conditional dignity names the state of human dignity in its dependence on political action. More specifically, it is dependent on the assertion of dignity by its bearer and/or the recognition by the political community of which the bearer is a member or from which he/she seeks membership or asylum. This view of human dignity holds that apart from assertion and recognition, in isolation or present together, human dignity does not exist. Human dignity may be asserted but not recognized, recognized but not asserted, or asserted and recognized; but from Arendt’s perspective, human dignity that is neither asserted nor recognized does not appear in the world—the intersubjective space between human beings—and is therefore politically meaningless. This is precisely what Arendt meant when she claimed in The Origins of Totalitarianism that the aim of totalitarianism is to destroy human dignity because “respect for human dignity implies the recognition of my fellow-men or our fellow-nations as subjects, as builders of worlds or cobuilders of a common world.”⁴ Human dignity can only have political significance if it appears in the public space between human beings; that is, it must be
enacted through the assertion of dignity in world building and/or involve the recognition of this agency. This conception is based on the principle of *conditionality*, which Arendt developed throughout her work and which is made explicit in *The Human Condition*.

In order to substantiate the claim that Arendt understood human dignity in terms of conditional dignity, I will excavate the origins of Arendt’s principle of conditionality through an analysis of her critical engagement with Heidegger’s essay “Das Ding” in her *Denktagebuch*, where she rehabilitates conditionality (*Bedingtheit*) as the underlying principle of plurality. This principle, as an intrinsically political principle, is, I argue, the key to understanding the meaning of human dignity in Arendt’s political philosophy.

**The Origins of Conditionality**

In *The Human Condition*, Arendt developed a conditional ontology that served as a governing principle for her theory of action. She argued that human beings are conditioned beings who condition the earth (the natural habitat for human beings) and the world (the human artifice that separates human beings from their natural habitat and joins them together), and in turn are conditioned by the earth they condition and the world they produce. Human existence is, therefore, characterized by a reciprocal conditioning. Human beings, acting in concert with each other, structure the earth and world they live in, and in turn, are structured by these natural environments and collaboratively built structures. However, Arendt claims that while these conditions are natural and inescapable in the human condition, they do not condition human beings absolutely. Human beings are always capable of new beginnings, of initiating new and unexpected patterns of action. To be human, according to Arendt, is to be a conditioned, conditioning being in the world.

The human condition comprehends more than the conditions under which life has been given to man. Men are conditioned beings because everything they come in contact with turns immediately into a condition of their existence. The world in which the *vita activa* spends itself consists of things produced by human activities; but the things that owe their existence exclusively to men nevertheless constantly condition their human makers. In addition to the conditions under which life is given to man on earth, and partly out of them, men constantly create their own, self-made conditions, which, in their human origin and their variability notwithstanding, possess the same conditioning power as natural things. Whatever touches or enters into a sustained relationship with human life immediately assumes the character of a condition of human existence. This is why men, no matter what they do, are always conditioned beings. Whatever enters the human world of its own accord or is drawn into it by human effort becomes part of the human condition. The impact of the world’s reality upon human existence is felt and received as a conditioning force. The objectivity of the world—its object or thing-character—and the human condition supplement each other; because human existence is conditioned existence, it would be impossible without things, and things would be a heap of unrelated articles, a non-world, if they were not the conditioners of human existence.
The principle of conditionality holds that human beings are conditioned (i.e., formed, shaped, changed) by the world produced by their work and action, and in turn are capable of conditioning the world that conditions them, and so are never conditioned absolutely. In fact, even the earth does not condition us absolutely, according to Arendt, as evidenced by the modern attempt to escape our earth-bound situation into space.

This principle of conditionality is fundamental to Arendt’s postmetaphysical anthropology, which avoids claims about human nature.\textsuperscript{10} From Arendt’s perspective, human nature is unknowable because in order for an individual knower to know his/her nature, he/she would have to cognize his/her subjectivity as an object, or as Arendt puts it, he/she would have to be “able to speak about a ‘who’ as though it were a ‘what’.”\textsuperscript{11} The only entity capable of this kind of knowledge from Arendt’s perspective would be God, because God is outside the human condition.

The theme of conditionality runs through \textit{The Human Condition} like a red thread, allowing the would-be Theseus to find his way through Arendt’s labyrinthine political analysis. The first occurrence of conditionality appears in the Prologue to \textit{The Human Condition}, where Arendt identifies the brain as “the physical, material condition (\textit{Bedingung}) of our thoughts.”\textsuperscript{12} The brain is the material prerequisite for thought; it provides the necessary physical requirements for the activity of thought to take place. Apart from this condition, thought is impossible. A condition, therefore, is the fundamental provision that makes something possible.

Arendt’s use of the singular form of “condition” in the English title of \textit{The Human Condition} is misleading. Arendt did not intend to suggest that there was a single condition that made human life possible. A comparison of \textit{The Human Condition} and Arendt’s 1967 German adaption, \textit{Vita Activa}, makes it clear that she saw human existence as comprised of a constellation of conditions.

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<th>\textit{The Human Condition}</th>
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<td>What I propose in the following is a reconsideration of the human condition from the vantage point of our newest experiences and our most recent fears.\textsuperscript{13}</td>
<td>Was ich daher im Folgenden vorschlage, ist eine Art Besinnung auf die Bedingungen, unter denen, soviel wir wissen, Menschen bisher gelebt haben, und diese Besinnung ist geleitet, auch wenn es nicht ausdrücklich gesagt ist, von den Erfahrungen und den Sorgen der gegenwärtigen Situation.\textsuperscript{14}</td>
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Arendt’s intention was to articulate the fundamental conditions (\textit{Grundbedingungen}) that make human life possible on earth. They are: the earth (\textit{Erde}), natality (\textit{Natalität}), mortality (\textit{Mortalität}), life (\textit{Leben}), worldliness (\textit{Weltlichkeit}), and plurality (\textit{Pluralität}).\textsuperscript{15} These conditions make possible three
fundamental activities (Grundtätigkeiten) of the active life:16 labor (Arbeit), work (Herstellen), and action (Handeln).17 The earth was “the quintessence of the human condition”18 for Arendt; it was the natural habitat for human life whose mortal coil unfolded between the conditions of birth and death. Life is a necessary prerequisite for labor. Arendt defined labor as the biological processes of growth, metabolism, and decay that take place in the physical existence of all life. Labor transforms nature into products for consumption for the preservation of the species. Worldliness is the necessary provision for work, which Arendt understood as the human activity of creating a durable and enduring human artifice (which includes cultural artifacts like art, religion, poetry, literature, etc.) in which to live. Plurality is the necessary prerequisite for action, which Arendt described as the direct relation among human beings and referred to as “the conditio per quam... of all political life.”19

Arendt’s use of the Latin term conditio further illuminates her understanding of conditionality. The noun conditio is derived from the verb condo, which means “to build,” “found,” or “establish.” It has an interesting linguistic history, especially in relationship to the verb condico. Condico means “to speak” (dicere) “together” (con), “to come to an agreement.” This is consistent with the history of the German verb bedingen, which originally meant “to agree with” or “to negotiate with.”20 Under Roman law, condico referred to a claimant’s summoning of a defendant to a legal proceeding, so that the two opposing sides could “come to terms” or “come to an agreement.”21 This agreement was the prerequisite for adjudicating the dispute. The nominative singular form, condicio, could also refer to the legal or social status of defendant in Roman legal proceedings.22 This status served to determine the terms under which a defendant would be sentenced and punished.23 Penalties were meted out according to the defendant’s legal (e.g., citizen or alien) or social (e.g., householder or slave) status. According to Mette Lebech, the nouns conditio and condicio had merged in classical Latin, so that the merged meaning became a fundamental state of affairs that gave rise to a plethora of expressive possibilities.24 In fact, the medieval theologian Robert Grossseteste referred to the pseudo-Ambrosian text De dignitate conditionis as De dignitate condicionis.25 When Arendt claims in Vita Activa that plurality is “die Bedingung... aller politischen Leben” and then adds that it is the “conditio per quam... aller politischen Leben,” she is clearly linking Bedingung with conditio in The Human Condition. Given the historical relationship between conditio and condicio, it is reasonable to assume that she understood condition to be a gathering that founds and makes something possible.

Arendt’s command of Latin is well known.26 She would certainly have been aware that conditio is a noun derived from conditus, the perfect passive participle of condo, “to put together,” “prepare,” “found,” or “establish,” as Titus Livy used the term in his Ab urbe condita, and as the pseudo-Ambrosian used it in the medieval text De dignitate conditionis humanae,27 where conditionis refers to the creation of human beings, their divine founding or establishment which dignifies their existence. Did Arendt understand conditions as foundations?
This understanding of condition calls to mind Kant’s “conditions of possibility” (Bedingungen der Möglichkeit) in the *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, which he used to indicate the a priori conditions that are necessary for the possibility of any experience (i.e., space, time, and the categories of the understanding).28 In this sense, Kant’s use of *Bedingung* carries with it both meanings of the condicio/condicio complex; the a priori conditions of consciousness establish the terms under which experience of the phenomenal world is possible.29 More specifically, the formal conditions of space and time provide the conditions for localizing and sequencing objects of possible experience, just as the categories of the understanding provide the conditions for logically ordering sensory data for the purposes of conceptualization and judgment. The entire cognitive enterprise is a gathering together of pure and empirical intuitions for the purposes of rendering experience intelligible.

Arendt’s annotated copy of *Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph von Schellings sämmtliche Werke*, volume 1, suggests that she was no doubt familiar with Schelling’s comment in *Vom Ich als Prinzip der Philosophie* that *bedingen* “contains nearly the whole treasure of philosophical truth.”30 Schelling drew a linguistic connection between *thing* (*Ding*) and its *conditioning* (*Bedingen*) (a connection that Heidegger would elaborate in his essay “Das Ding”) in order to show that everything is conditioned to be the thing that it is. Schelling pointed out that *Bedingung* indicates the “action” (*Handeln*) that makes something a “thing” (*Ding*) and no “thing” can be “a law unto itself,” so that an unconditioned thing (*unbedingtes Ding*) is a contradiction.31 This insight had direct bearing on his attempt to overcome the subject/object dichotomy that occupied the minds of German idealists after Kant. Every subject is conditioned by an object, and every object is conditioned by a subject, according to Schelling. As Eric Watkins has pointed out, Schelling attempted to modify Kant’s notion of conditionality in order to account for the absolute—the unconditioned.32 However, Kant and Schelling were not the most proximate sources of Arendt’s notion of conditionality. Arendt was a close reader of French existentialist authors such as Jean-Paul Sartre, Albert Camus, and André Malraux, all of whom made use of the term “the human condition,” which originated in the *Essais* of Michel de Montaigne.33 She most certainly followed these authors in their use of the term “human condition,” which heralded a move away from essentialist descriptions of human experience toward a more dynamic view that emphasized the priority of existence over essence. However, as we will see, Arendt developed her principle of conditionality primarily through a critical engagement with Martin Heidegger from 1950 to 1958.

**Arendt’s Critical Reading of Heidegger**

Arendt’s personal relationship34 and critical engagement with Heidegger are well known.35 For our purposes, it is important to note that Arendt visited Heidegger in May of 1950—her first return trip to Germany since fleeing in
1933—and took the opportunity to reconcile with him.\(^{36}\) Leaving aside the intense debate around the nature and influence of Arendt’s personal relationship with Heidegger, I want to focus exclusively on her critical engagement with Heidegger’s thought after this auspicious meeting in 1950 as it relates to the principle of conditionality, for which two preliminary points must be made.

First, Arendt was not a Heideggerian. In fact, as her colleagues and friends were compelled to admit after her death, she was not a thinker easily categorized.\(^ {37}\) This was especially true in regard to Heidegger. As Dana Villa has argued, Arendt appropriated Heidegger in a “highly agonistic manner; as twisting, displacing, and reinterpreting his thought in ways designed to illuminate a range of exceedingly un-Heideggerian issues; for example, the nature of political action, the positive ontological role of the public realm, the nature of political judgment, and the conditions for an antiauthoritarian, antifoundational democratic politics.”\(^ {38}\) Arendt saw Heidegger’s fundamental ontology as politically problematic because it alienated Dasein from the world. She contrasted Heidegger’s conception of Dasein with the transcendental subject of Kantian anthropology that she had encountered in Karl Jaspers’s philosophy, and which she recast as a political subject by way of Kant’s notion of the sensus communis in the Third Critique.

For Arendt, Jaspers’s anthropology with its emphasis on communication offered a more politically viable account of human existence. Heidegger’s Dasein was cut off from the world. As she put it in her 1946 essay “What is Existenz Philosophy?”:

*Dasein* could be truly itself only if it could pull back from its being-in-the-world into itself, but that is what its nature can never permit it to do, and that is why, by its very nature, it is always a falling away from itself. . . .

By bringing Dasein back to the Self without any detour by way of man, the question of the meaning of Being has fundamentally been given up and replaced with the question more fundamental to this philosophy, that is, the question of the meaning of the Self. But this question seems truly unanswerable, because a Self, taken in its absolute isolation, is meaningless; and if it is not isolated but is involved in the everyday life of the They, it is no longer Self. This ideal of the Self follows as a consequence of Heidegger’s making of man what God was in earlier ontology. A being of this highest order is conceivable only as single and unique and knowing no equals. What Heidegger consequently designates as the “fall” includes all those modes of human existence in which man is not God but lives together with his own kind in the world.\(^ {39}\)

For Arendt, the attempt to answer the question “Who am I?” in isolation from our relationship with others in a common world is philosophically untenable because it would require that a subject be capable of understanding himself as an object, or cognizing the “who” in terms of a “what.”\(^ {40}\) As Arendt made clear in *The Human Condition*, human beings reveal their unique identities, who they are, through speaking and acting with others.\(^ {41}\) Moreover, the judgment regarding who a person is, is not made by the agent performing the action, but
by the community of observers.\textsuperscript{42} For this reason, we can never arrive at a Self in isolation from others, but only through our engagement in the world with others, and thus, the public realm of political action is fundamental, not \textit{Dasein}. Although Heidegger would largely agree with Arendt that \textit{Dasein}, who is always already in-the-world, is constituted through being-with others in the world, he would also point out that this being-with is an inauthentic mode of being—a falling away. So for example, Heidegger acknowledges in \textit{Being and Time} that \textit{Dasein} begins in the world with others:

\begin{quote}
Being toward others is not only an autonomous irreducible relation of being, as being-with it already exists with the being of \textit{Dasein}. Of course, it is indisputable that a lively mutual acquaintanceship on the basis of being-with often depends on how far one’s own \textit{Dasein} has actually understood itself, but this only means that it depends upon how far it has made one’s essential being with others transparent and not disguised it. This is possible only if \textit{Dasein} as being-in-the-world is always already with others.\textsuperscript{43}
\end{quote}

But he also describes this being-with as a destruction of \textit{Dasein}’s existential authenticity:

\begin{quote}
This being-with-one-another dissolves one’s own \textit{Dasein} completely into the kind of being of “the others” in such a way that the others, as distinguishable and explicit, disappear more and more. In this inconspicuousness and unascertainability, the they unfolds its true dictatorship. We enjoy ourselves and have fun the way \textit{they} enjoy themselves. We read, see, and judge literature and art the way \textit{they} see and judge. But we also withdraw from the “great mass” the way \textit{they} withdraw, we find “shocking” what \textit{they} find shocking. The they, which is nothing definite and which all are, though not as a sum, prescribes the kind of being of everydayness.\textsuperscript{44}
\end{quote}

In order for \textit{Dasein} to truly be itself, it would need to emancipate itself from the “dictatorship” of the \textit{they}—liberate itself from average everydayness—and find an authentic mode of being-in-the-world with others. Heidegger names this authentic mode \textit{das Volk}, the community or people to which one belongs \textit{fatefully} (as a result of one’s \textit{thrownness}) and whose destiny is the authentic determination of one’s existence.\textsuperscript{45} It was precisely the National Socialist emphasis on the historical destiny of \textit{das Volk} that attracted Heidegger to its ranks. Arendt was keenly aware of what was at stake in Heidegger’s autochthony: the loss of plurality, which for Arendt, constituted a diminishment of the political realm—a realm that she was seeking to dignify, not diminish. For this reason, Heidegger was a crucial dialogue partner for Arendt, but she was never his follower.

The second point, a corollary of the first, is that Arendt politicized Heideggerian concepts. As Lewis and Sandra Hinchman have argued, Arendt’s critical reading of Heidegger was an attempt to follow Heidegger’s postmetaphysical humanism, but also to “escape a certain contemplative aloofness and remoteness from public affairs which she sensed in Heidegger’s fundamental ontology.”\textsuperscript{46} Her goal was not to become Heideggerian, but to transform Heideggerian
categories into politically viable concepts in order to rehabilitate the public realm. Seyla Benhabib agrees with this assessment and argues that Arendt inverted Heidegger's categories from *Being and Time* to open them to the political realm.

Being-unto-death is displaced by natality, the isolated Dasein is replaced by a condition of plurality; and instead of instrumental action, a new category of human activity, action, understood as speech and doing, emerges. Everyday being-in-the-world, rather than being the condition of inauthenticity into which Dasein is thrown, now becomes that "space of appearance" into which we are inserted as acting and speaking beings and within which we reveal who we are and what we are capable of.47

Arendt's motivation for this transformation of Heidegger's ontology was, as Margaret Canovan has shown, to take account of and come to understand totalitarianism. Arendt came to understand that totalitarianism emerged concomitant with the loss of a "shared public realm," rendering human beings alienated and superfluous.48 In Heidegger, Arendt discovered a crucial dialogue partner for exploring totalitarianism and reestablishing the public realm. Arendt's engagement with Heidegger was a critical reevaluation of his fundamental ontology in order to develop its political possibilities. One of those possibilities was Heidegger's notion of conditionality that Arendt discovered in her reflections on Heidegger's essay "Das Ding."49

**"Das Ding" and Bedingtheit**

In Heidegger's 1950 essay "Das Ding" he developed a mythopoetic language for understanding the event of Being, and sought to provide a phenomenological description of the thingliness of the thing (das Dingliche am Ding).50 As Theodore George has noted:

Heidegger does not associate being with some eternal realm of ideas or, for that matter, with an idea that constitutes the proper function of a being, and so, neither does he think of the measure of our conduct as some sort of principle that stands above or within the flow of becoming. Instead, he holds that being is an event, indeed, an opening not only within time but of time itself that allows beings to show themselves as what they are. Accordingly, being does not impose a measure on human life as if from on high but rather recommends a measure as part of the very movement of our lives, in the occurrence of something that interrupts or ruptures the familiar flow of things so as to let them show themselves as if for the first time.51

Things, in other words, have a measure of their own that is disclosed in the event of their being. In order to describe this measure, Heidegger employs a mythopoetic language that is phenomenological rather than representational, allowing him to describe how the thing (Ding) shows itself in its standing-forth (Her-Stehen).52 He describes this standing-forth as a gathering of earth, sky,
divinity, and mortals, by which he means to indicate, in mythopoetic terms, the phenomenological structure of a thing's relationship to its referential totality or world (Welt). The earth is the natural referent, the sky is the horizon of nature that Heidegger described in terms of the ordering or sequencing of nature (e.g., the path of the sun and moon, the annual seasons, day and night, and weather patterns). mortals refers to human beings in their finitude, and divinities refers to the horizons for meaning in human existence.

Andrew Mitchell has elucidated Heidegger's fourfold by highlighting the centrality of the principle of relationality in the concept. As he points out:

The fourfold gathers around the thing in a tenuous convergence. There is nothing everlasting or monumental about such things; they tarry ephemerally (Heidegger's term is weilen). The thing abides. The same gathering that unites the four in the thing is equally a disaggregation of that thing. What is gathered is not a homogeneity, but a spaced parting of assembled members. The fourfold disaggregates the thing by releasing it from the bounds of an encapsulated self-identity.... The fourfold delimits and thereby situates the thing in a context of the world. Each element of the fourfold names a limit or interface of the thing whereby it passes into world.

Earth, sky, divinity, and mortals form the limits of a thing and its disaggregate parts. Each aspect of the fourfold is, therefore, interdependent, mirroring the rest, so that the fourfold is a unity. This gathering of earth, sky, divinity, and mortals is a single interreferential fourfold (die Einfalt der Vier). Heidegger pays specific attention to the Old German etymology of dinc, which meant "to gather, to deal with a matter or case." What Heidegger misses here, but Arendt is sensitive to, are the conceptual parallels between the German dinc and the Latin condicio, which she employs in The Human Condition. Following Heidegger's insight that a thing is a conditioned thing, a gathering of interdependent phenomena that are disclosed in thinking, Arendt rethinks philosophical anthropology in terms of Bedingung.

In spring 1952, Arendt was reading and reflecting on Heidegger's essay "Das Ding." Her reflections centered on a single passage that became a recurring object of her thought. The passage is:

If we let the thing be present in its thinging from out of the worlding world, then we are thinking of the thing as thing. Taking thought in this way, we let ourselves be concerned by the thing's worlding being. Thinking in this way, we are called by the thing as the thing. In the strict sense of the German word Be-Dingt, we are the be-thinged, the conditioned ones. We have left behind us the presumption of all unconditionedness.

In this passage, Heidegger is describing a more primordial mode of thinking (Gelassenheit) that is necessary to allow things to show themselves without representing them; that is, without making a judgment about them. This kind of thinking is not the rationality of positivism or scientific thinking. This kind of thinking does not even aim at truth, but rather it begins with the experience of truth, as Arendt explained in a letter to Mary McCarthy in the summer of 1954:
Truth ... is always the beginning of thought; thinking is always result-less. That is the difference between "philosophy" and science: Science has results, philosophy never. Thinking starts after an experience of truth has struck home, so to speak.61

Thinking begins with the experience of the thing "in its thinging out of the worlding world," as Heidegger put it. Truth, as Arendt understands it, is the experience of letting the thing "strike home" in our care (Sorge) about the thing, so that we are "be-thinged," conditioned by the object of thought. The problem for Arendt, of course, is privileging thinking over the other, more worldly activity of the mind: judgment. Arendt recognized the importance of Heidegger's insight into the conditionality of thinking, but she also understood that thinking is an activity that can only be carried out when we withdraw from the world. She wanted to extend this conditionality of thinking back to the world.

Arendt quotes the passage from Heidegger's "Das Ding" three times in her Denktagebuch from the spring of 1952 until the summer of 1953. The first instance occurs in an entry dated March, 1952, where Arendt writes:

Heidegger: "We are—in the strict sense of the word—the Conditioned. We have left the arrogance of all of our absolutes behind us." "... from only the representational, i.e., explanatory thinking in the recollective thinking that thinks." (This is the real turn. But why it should be a "step back" is incomprehensible. Unless the expression of this thinking takes on the form of a saying and recalls the old).62

Arendt is explicitly concerned here with the "step back" from the world that Gelassenheit entails. Arendt agreed with Heidegger that the arrogance (Anmaßung) of representational thinking that characterized modern techno-science had left human existence alienated and worldless, and she followed him in celebrating the postmetaphysical abandonment of "absolutes," but she was concerned that the "step back" of recollective thinking (Andenken) would only result in the same—an isolated Self alienated from the common world. Heidegger's thinking was a retreat from the world, not a return to it. The locus of conditionality for Arendt is not, as we will see, human existence, but the space of appearance between human beings in the common world.

Arendt returned to reflect on this passage in January 1953 and recorded the following in her Denktagebuch:

"The arrogance of the unconditioned" (Heidegger), the arrogance to have the measure of the "Conditioned," because the measure could of course only be the absolutely non-conditioned. Since Plato, to do philosophy was no longer a matter of "truth" or "being," but rather, to find the measure in the maelstrom of the world and of life. Thinking without yardsticks is to dispense with judgments in the former sense, but not how Hegel put inference in the place of judgment.63

In this entry, Arendt juxtaposes the "arrogance" of philosophers who sought absolute "measures" to arrive at valid judgments and Heidegger's anti-
foundationalist thinking—"thinking without yardsticks"—which she would later popularize as "thinking without banisters" (Denken ohne Geländer). In juxtaposing these two types of thinking, Arendt attempted to rethink the conditional relationship between man and the world without succumbing to Heidegger's abandonment of the world.

She recognized the dangers of the Protagorean answer that "man is the measure of all use things (chremata), of the existence of those that are, and of the non-existence of those that are not." As she explained in The Human Condition, Plato was the first to recognize the dangers of the Protagorean proposition:

The point of the matter is that Plato saw immediately that if one makes man the measure of all things for use, it is man the user and instrumentalizer, and not man the speaker and doer or man the thinker, to whom the world is being related. And since it is in the nature of man the user and instrumentalizer to look upon everything as means to an end—upon every tree as potential wood—this must eventually mean that man becomes the measure not only of things whose existence depends upon him but of literally everything there is.65

_Homo faber_, the being for whom the world is merely a heap of raw materials awaiting transformation into usable goods, is the modern instantiation of the Protagorean dictum. Plato's answer to Protagoras was to seek a transcendent measure, but according to Arendt, this only amounted to a flight from the world, an escape that she understood Heidegger to be taking as well.

Arendt continued to contemplate the problem of measures in light of Heidegger's saying "we are the conditioned" and concluded the following.

On Measure: Heidegger's "We are the conditioned" seemingly returned to the dictum "man as measure of all things" so as to, in truth, only complement it. When man is seen as the measure of things, the question arises: And what is the measure of man, indeed, in the sense that the "measure" cannot be its own measure? On this question there is within all transcendence-avoidant thinking only the answer: Things are the measure of man.66

Where is the measure to be found? If it is in man, then the world of things is reduced to a heap of raw materials, and if it is outside of the world, then the world is reduced to a realm of shadows and illusions. Both have grave consequences for politics. Arendt was aware of another—equally unsatisfying—answer: things are the measure of man. What is at stake if things are the measure? Arendt realized that while human existence is impossible without things, things are not the measure of human beings.67 There was a space that had been overlooked, indeed explicitly neglected from Plato to Heidegger: the public realm where human beings conditioned their world through speech and action and were in turn conditioned by the speech and action of others.

In June of 1953, Arendt came to realize that plurality was the measure—not man, not an otherworldly absolute, not even things. We are conditioned by the fact of plurality, the fundamental condition that makes politics possible:
The biggest part of genuine politeuein is the living mutual-disclosure of doxa, the back and forth and against. In this with-and-against-each-other they bring their own worth: aristeuein. Pericles, whom Plato so despised in the Gorgias, wanted that philokaloumen kai philosophoumen that was still a living component of politeuein, rather than imposing its measure upon it from the outside as kolon and sophon. Neither man is the measure of all things, nor God the measure of human things, nor even things the measure of the man. What conditions us, is the fact of plurality as such—and that does not mean that we are interdependent as in Marx’s “socialized humanity”; this is just the perversion of conditionality through plurality. And thus, as with Heidegger, the arrogance of the measure no longer applies at all.68

What is important to notice in this passage is Arendt’s description of how validity or worth (Geltung) is disclosed through political action. She links the worth of human beings disclosed in political action to their excellence (aristeuein). Arendt would have us understand that human beings are capable of unfathomable and unexpected actions that are capable of disclosing who they are. Sometimes this is glory; sometimes this is evil. What should be understood here is that it is precisely within the ebb and flow of political activity that the measure, long sought after by philosophers, appears. We are conditioned by the action of others, and they are in turn conditioned by our action. This common world is governed by the principle of conditionality and is constituted by plurality.

Plurality and Conditionality

While Arendt is explicit that plurality is a fundamental condition that makes action possible, she also makes clear that conditionality is the operative principle within the condition of plurality, insofar as it facilitates individuation through action. Arendt argued in The Human Condition that human beings reveal who they are through speech and action, and this revelation is like a “second birth” by which we “insert ourselves into the human world.”69 Given that Arendt argued that political action is the activity that constitutes our common world—the necessary prerequisite for human beings to disclose themselves to one another through speech and action—that we both condition and are conditioned by this common world through the back and forth of political action (the expression and recognition of our unique identities through speech and action), and that human dignity is a worldly concept, then whatever the political meaning of human dignity is, it must be understood in terms of conditionality.70 Arendt would have us understand that human dignity is conditional; that is, it is dependent on political action. Human dignity cannot appear unless it is asserted and/or recognized through speech and action.

In a lecture given at The New School for Social Research in 1953, Arendt described the assertion and recognition of honor, which can serve as an example of how she might have addressed the conditionality of human dignity:
Honor: Love of distinction. Equally original. In being together I make the experience of being distinct and therefore can require distinction. I come into my own by competing, measuring myself with others. Honor is the public recognition for this particular being who I am. This is my honor, honorable is what does not destroy this distinction and the respect for it.\textsuperscript{71}

Honor must be asserted through distinguishing oneself through speech and action in the \textit{agon} of public life in order to appear in the world. Correlatively, the honor that is asserted must be either recognized or denied because all human action presupposes a spectator who is the recipient of the appearance. As she points out in \textit{The Life of the Mind}, "Nothing and nobody exists in this world whose very being does not presuppose a spectator. In other words, nothing that is, insofar as it appears, exists in the singular, everything that is is meant to be perceived by somebody. Not Man but men inhabit this planet. Plurality is the law of the earth."\textsuperscript{72} Whatever appears in the world, then, is meant to be seen, meant to be recognized whether it is or is not. However, whatever is meant to appear can be destroyed through nonassertion or nonrecognition. One can destroy honor either by failing to assert it through dishonorable action or by failing to recognize the honor that appears through the actions of others. If honor and particularity are characteristics of dignity, and honor is dependent on its assertion and recognition, then human dignity is also dependent on the assertion and recognition of dignity; that is, it is conditional.

Arendt’s analysis moves beyond traditional accounts of human dignity that have relied principally on the \textit{status} and \textit{stature} of human being that are independent of culture, class, and political affiliation, and retrofits the concept for the political realm through the notion of \textit{stance}—how human beings stand in relationship to one another. Arendt’s reconceptualization of human dignity reminds us that the concept was originally a political concept, originating within the interrelations of human beings in the public realm.

Arendt’s notion of conditional dignity relies on a cognitive politics that emphasizes the co-responsibility of individuals and political regimes to insist on the right of human beings to have a place in the world. It is precisely this “right” to have a place in the world—the right to belong to a political community and never to be reduced to the status of stateless animality—that indicates the political meaning of human dignity in Arendt’s political philosophy. Instead of trying to reestablish it on metaphysical foundations, Arendt sought to engage in critical and experimental reflections about human dignity, so that it might again (or perhaps for the first time) become the object of philosophical wonder (\textit{thaumazein}) and political judgment and could be understood to encompass both “the grandeur and the misery” of the human condition.\textsuperscript{73} From Arendt’s perspective, human dignity had to be preserved and asserted by individuals and guaranteed and recognized by a political community if it was to have any meaning at all. Human dignity was therefore a \textit{conditional} phenomenon of worldly human existence for Arendt. The conditionality of human dignity is twofold: first, dignity
depends on the preservation and expression of dignity by the person who bears it, and, second, it depends on the recognition of others. This view of human dignity means that dignity is fragile, so that as a political concept it is the result of collaborative thinking and dialogue.

There is an obvious objection to Arendt's account of conditional dignity: If human dignity is conditional, does not this mean that the dignity of human beings is contingent? It is true that Arendtian dignity is a thin account of human dignity rather than a thick account, and her conditional dignity is a fragile basis for human rights. This could be understood as a fatal flaw in Arendt's account of human dignity, but it is actually its greatest advantage. Thick accounts of human dignity (e.g., intrinsic dignity, the image of God, freedom, etc.) are freighted with contentious philosophical and theological assumptions. As Kwame Anthony Appiah has keenly recognized, "a conception of rights that's highly determinate in its application may not be thin enough to win widespread agreement; a conception of rights that's thin enough to win widespread agreement risks indeterminacy or impotence." Arendt was certainly aware of this dilemma. She was simultaneously aware that human dignity needed a "new guarantee," and that our most determinate formulations of this guarantee had failed. Every philosophical anthropology, every theological description of man, and every moral code had been exposed as insufficient to protect the dignity of persons. Arendtian dignity is "thin enough to win widespread support," but there is not guarantee that it will. Arendt reminds us that if human dignity is to be guaranteed, we will need to preserve collectively the common world where every person has a space to appear. Human dignity can be guaranteed only when we face up to what she called our "predicament of common responsibility."

Human dignity appears in the world when it is asserted and/or recognized. In the best cases, human beings assert their worth and fundamental dignity by enacting their natal capabilities through speaking and acting in responsible and collaborative ways, and their dignity is recognized when their natal capabilities are not impeded. Under the best conditions, human dignity appears when the plurality of the human condition is given the space to appear. However, as history has shown and continues to show, these conditions are not always maintained, even in the most civilized nations.

Human dignity can be asserted but not recognized. In this case, the bearer of dignity takes responsibility for asserting his/her dignity within a political community that denies or fails to acknowledge it. For example, the recent wave of persecutions of Rohingya Muslims in Myanmar has resulted in a shocking humanitarian crisis, which has reached what many are calling a pre-genocidal stage. More than 140,000 Rohingya have been driven from their homes and many (an estimated 25,000) set adrift in boats on the Andaman sea seeking asylum in Malaysia, Indonesia, and Thailand. Initially, these countries refused to admit these refugees, who asserted their right to belong to a human community in seeking asylum. By refusing to recognize the legitimacy of the refugees' claim, these countries denied their right to have rights, and therefore, refused to
recognize their human dignity. After pressure from human rights groups and the UN, the nations began to admit the refugees. While Rohingya individuals asserted their dignity through seeking asylum, the political communities in which they sought asylum did not immediately recognize it.

Human dignity can also be recognized but not asserted. In the case of the dead, for example, the bearer of dignity can no longer assert dignity, which can nevertheless be recognized by a community to which the bearer belonged. For example, Yad Vashem has compiled the names of victims of the Shoah in a central database for the purpose of honoring those who were denied their dignity in the Nazi genocide. These names are read at many ceremonies around the world on Yom Ha Shoah, a day designated to remember those who died in the Shoah, in order to recognize their dignity as individuals.

Children represent one of the most vulnerable categories of human beings who may lack the capacity to assert their dignity either due to age, illness, socioeconomic conditions, or pre-natal status. Thomas Pogge has reported that each day 29,000 children under the age of five die from conditions related to global poverty. Those who survive the extreme conditions of global poverty are frequently exploited as sex workers or child laborers. In fact, at least 218 million children between the ages of 5 and 17 are child laborers. The most vulnerable children are orphaned and stateless. Without recourse to family support and protection or state access to fundamental resources like food, shelter, healthcare, education, and legal protection, these children become invisible and die. How can a child assert his/her dignity if she lacks the necessary rational and linguistic capabilities and has lost state recognition and family protection? The League of Nations answered this question in 1924 in a most Arendtian way. In the Geneva Declaration of the Rights of the Child, the League of Nations enacted a surrogate assertion of dignity on behalf of all children, declaring that every child was entitled to the following:

The child must be given the means requisite for its normal development, both materially and spiritually;
The child that is hungry must be fed; the child that is sick must be nursed; the child that is backward must be helped; the delinquent child must be reclaimed; and the orphan and the waif must be sheltered and succored;
The child must be the first to receive relief in times of distress;
The child must be put in a position to earn a livelihood, and must be protected against every form of exploitation;
The child must be brought up in the consciousness that its talents must be devoted to the service of fellow men.

These basic rights were declared on behalf of children who were incapable of asserting their own dignity and laying claim to fundamental rights. This declaration was extended in the Declaration of the Rights of the Child adopted by the General Assembly on November 20, 1959, as well as the Convention on the Rights of the Child ratified on November 20, 1989. Apart from these acts of
surrogate recognition and assertion of the dignity and rights of children, the dignity of children would be politically meaningless.

Given that human dignity appears in the world under the conditions of assertion and recognition, it follows that apart from these conditional elements, human dignity does not exist politically. This is not a metaphysical claim but a political claim. Arendt can be understood to be developing a regional ontology that understands the realm of politics as a phenomenal field in which human dignity is constituted. This ontology is a worldly ontology in contrast to foundationalist approaches to metaphysics that seek to ground human dignity in otherworldly ideas or principles. Given that human dignity is primarily (and historically) a political concept, and only secondarily (and from Arendt’s perspective erroneously) a metaphysical concept, it has meaning only when it appears in the world through its assertion and/or recognition.

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Notes


2 By political ontology, I mean to distinguish Arendt’s development of a regional ontology from both traditional accounts of metaphysics and Heidegger’s fundamental ontology. A regional ontology is the phenomenological description of a given field (e.g., politics, mathematics) and how things are constituted, or come to be, within that field.


4 Arendt, OT, 590–01.


6 By structures, I mean to indicate a range of human artifacts and cultural forms from physical structures, monuments, and civic infrastructure to the intellectual and spiritual structures of the arts, humanities, and religion that give shape and meaning to human lives.
Arendt, HC, 11.

8 I take Arendt to be making an explicit reference to Heidegger’s essay “Das Ding” here. This is significant because, as I argue, she developed her principle of conditionality through a critical engagement with Heidegger’s essay, especially his treatment of *bedingt*.

9 Arendt, HC, 9.


11 Arendt, HC, 10.

12 Arendt, HC, 3. Arendt translated The Human Condition into German in 1967 under the title *Vita Activa: oder Vom tätigen Leben* (VA hereafter) (Munich: R. Piper & Co. Verlag, 1981) (originally published in 1967). In this translation, Arendt translated “condition” as *Bedingung*, which can mean the terms under which something can take place, or the stipulations governing the exercise of some capacity, or the necessary qualifications or prerequisites for something. All supplemental German terms in quotation from *The Human Condition* are taken from *Vita Activa*.

13 Arendt, HC, 5.

14 Arendt, VA, 12.

15 Arendt, HC, 7.

16 Arendt discussed the fundamental activities of the contemplative life (e.g., thinking, willing, and judging) in *The Life of the Mind* (Orlando, FL: Harcourt, 1978), an unfinished sequel to her *Vita Activa*.

17 Arendt, HC, 7.

18 It is important to note that in the *Vita Activa*, Arendt substituted the quotation “die Stellung des Menschen im Kosmos” (the place of humans in the universe) for “the quintessence of the human condition.” The quotation appears to be an allusion to Max Scheler’s book, *Die Stellung des Menschen im Kosmos* (Hamburg: Felix Meiner Verlag, 2015), in which Scheler offers an elaborately developed philosophical anthropology that situates human nature within the hierarchy of the natural order.

19 Arendt, HC, 7.


22 Ibid.

23 Ibid.


25 Ibid., 64, footnote 49.

26 Arendt was a diligent reader of Latin and Greek text from her earliest education. See Elizabeth Young-Bruehl, *Hannah Arendt, for Love of the World* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1982), xlviii, xlx.


personal library contains a complete set of Schelling’s work; in particular, the first volume containing “Vom Ich als Prinzip der Philosophie” is heavily annotated. See her copy of Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph von Schellings sämmtliche Werke: Erster Band, Vom Ich als Prinzip der Philosophie. Briefe über Dogmatismus und Kritizismus. Abhandlungen zu Erläuterungen des Idealismus der Wissenschaftslehre 1820 (Stuttgart: J.G. Cotta, 1856), 149–244.

36 Young-Bruehl, Hannah Arendt, 107. For a compelling examination of the meeting between Arendt and Heidegger from the perspective of Arendt’s reflections in her Denktagebuch, see Berkowitz, “Bearing Logs,” 1.
38 Villa, Arendt and Heidegger, 13.

Arendt, HC, 179.

Ibid., 180. “Although nobody knows whom he reveals when he discloses himself in deed or word, he must be willing to risk the disclosure, and this neither the doer of good works, who must be without self and preserve complete anonymity, nor the criminal, who must hide himself from others, can take upon themselves. Both are lonely figures, the one being for, the other against, all men; they, therefore, remain outside the pale of human intercourse and are, politically, marginal figures who usually enter the historical scene in times of corruption, disintegration, and political bankruptcy. Because of its inherent tendency to disclose the agent together with the act, action needs for its full appearance the shining brightness we once called glory, and which is possible only in the public realm.”


Heidegger, Being and Time, I, 123.

Heidegger, Being and Time, II, 384. Heidegger argued: “But if fateful Da-sein essentially exists as being-in-the-world in being-with-others, its occurrence is an occurrence-with and is determined as destiny. With this term, we designate the occurrence of the community, of a people [Volk]. Destiny is not composed of individual fates, nor can being-with-one-another be conceived of as the mutual occurrence of several subjects. The fates are already guided beforehand in being-with-one-another in the same world and in the same resoluteness for definite possibilities. In communication and in battle the power of destiny first becomes free. The fateful destiny of Da-sein in and with its ‘generation’ constitutes the complete, authentic occurrence of Da-sein.”

Hinchman, “In Heidegger’s Shadow,” 183.


Margaret Canovan, Hannah Arendt: A Reinterpretation of Her Political Thought (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 112.


Ibid., 175.

Ibid., 179.

Ibid., 179–80.


Ibid., 177.

Ibid. Heidegger’s interpretation of dinge parallels the Latin condicio, which meant to summon, or gather for the purpose of settling an issue.


62 Arendt, March 1952, Denktagebuch, #28, 195. "Heidegger: 'Wir sind—im strengen Sinne des Wort—die Be-Dingten. Wir haben die Anmaßung alles Unbedingten hinter uns gelassen.' '... aus dem nur vorstellenden, d.h. erklärenden Denken in das andenkende Denken.' (Dies die wirkliche Kehrse. Warum aber sie ein 'Schritt zurück' sein soll, ist unerfindlich. Es sei denn, dass die Ausdrucksformen dieses Denkens die Spruchform wird und das Alte erinnert.)"

63 Arendt, January, 1953, Denktagebuch, #16, 303. "'Die Anmaßung des Unbedingten' (Heidegger) ist die Anmaßung, den Massstab für das 'Bedingte' zu haben, denn der Massstab könnte natürlich nur das schlechthin Nicht-bedingte sein. Seine Plato war es der Philosophie nicht mehr um 'Wahrheit' oder das 'Sein' zu tun, sondern darum, im Strudel der Welt und des Lebens den Massstab zu finden. Ohne Massstäbe zu denken heisst, auf Urteilen im bisherigen Sinne zu verzichten, aber nicht wie Hegel das Schliessen an die Stelle des Urteils zu setzen. 'It's important to note here that "Ohne Massstäbe zu denken"—thinking without yardsticks"—is a variation on Arendt's well known phrase "Denken ohne Geländer"—thinking without banisters.

64 Arendt, HC, 157–58.
65 Ibid., 158.


67 Arendt, HC, 9. "The objectivity of the world—its object- or thing-character—and the human condition supplement each other; because human existence is conditioned existence, it would be impossible without things, and things would be a heap of unrelated articles, a non-world, if they were not the conditioners of human existence."


69 Arendt, HC, 176.

70 Michael Bösch has discerned two aspects of the identity that is disclosed through action. The first is initial identity in which personal identity is founded on the basis of the condition of natality, and the second is communicative identity, which names the identity that appears in the world through collaborative action with others. See his "Pluralität und Identität bei Hannah Arendt," Zeitschrift für philosophische Forschung 53, no. 4 (1999): 569–88, especially 570–571.


72 Arendt, LM, 19.
75 Arendt, OT, 236.
76 It must be remembered here that Arendt understood the evaluative condition of dignified human
action to be cooperation—responsible action that recognizes others as fellow human beings with
the capacity to assert their dignity through speech and action.
77 Editorial Board, “The Horrors of Human Trafficking in Southeast Asia,” The New York Times,
78 Ibid.
79 Yad Vashem, “The Central Database of Shoah Victims’ Names.” Retrieved June 2, 2015, from
80 Thomas W. Pogge, World Poverty and Human Rights (Malden, MA: Polity, 2008), 2.
82 Ibid., 103.
83 Jacqueline Bhabha, Children Without a State: A Global Human Rights Challenge (Cambridge,
84 League of Nations, Declaration of the Rights of the Child, September 26, 1924. Retrieved August
85 UN General Assembly, Declaration of the Rights of the Child, November 20, 1959, A/RES/1386
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eral Assembly, Convention on the Rights of the Child, November 20, 1989, United Nations,
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