Telling Time Together: 
Hannah Arendt and the Temporal Condition of Human Beings in the World 

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This paper is an analysis, via the thought of Hannah Arendt, of the temporal dimension of a life-world. The difference between worldly time and historical time is described, as are the various components of the phenomenon of worldly time. Although it is a rare occurrence, historically, for worldly time to “break down” and to go untold, Arendt certainly believed that worldly time had “stopped” in her lifetime, and at the end of her life she was wrestling with the question of “how to re-start time”. This question is perhaps even more pressing today. Although Arendt never gathered together all the threads in her thought concerning worldly time, this paper is a preliminary effort to do just that. 

Introduction 

Near the end of Hannah Arendt’s “Preface” to Between Past and Future, there appears, it seems, a most curious contradiction in her thought. On the one hand she straightforwardly claims that the “gap between past and future” which she had just been describing was an entirely mental phenomenon, or an experience humans have only when we are thinking. As she explicitly states, “applied to historical or biographical time none of these metaphors can possibly make sense because gaps in time do not occur there”. On the other hand, and on the very next page, she asserts that “the thread of tradition” has broken, and with the cutting of this thread “the gap between past and future ceased to be a condition peculiar only to the activity of thought and restricted as an experience to those few who made thinking their primary business. It became a tangible reality and perplexity for all; that is, it became a fact of political relevance”. 

Strikingly, this apparent contradiction between a gap in time as a purely mental phenomenon and a gap in time as a “tangible reality” appears again in Arendt’s final, unfinished work, The Life of the Mind. At the conclusion of volume 1, “Thinking”, she was again writing of the experience, when thinking, of a gap between past and future, and again she insisted that her metaphorical descriptions of this experience were valid only in the realm of thought. In her words from that text, “applied to historical or biographical time, these metaphors cannot possibly make sense; gaps in time do not occur there”. What then to make of the fact that two pages later she was writing of “a fragmented past”, and that the last twelve pages of volume 2, “Willing”, are devoted to the political problem of “how to re-start time within an inexorable time continuum?” What to make of the fact that in these pages she explicitly identified a “hiatus between a no-more and a not-yet”, and turned her attention toward “such gaps of historical time”. 

I suggest this apparent contradiction points to one of Arendt’s most profound insights into the temporal condition of human beings in the world. This insight has to do with the lived experience of 

2 Ibid., 13. 
3 Ibid., 14. 
5 Ibid. (Vol. 1), 212. 
7 Ibid., 204. 
8 Ibid., 205.
a worldly hiatus between a past that is no longer and a future that is not yet. To put it in language 
Arendt did not use, this gap between past and future is best characterised as a time in which worldly time is not being told meaningfully together. The key to unlocking her apparent contradiction is that in her thought worldly time is not the same as historical time. While it is true that occasionally she, or perhaps one of her “Engli...
Contra Arendt, I do not believe this fact become a tangible “reality and perplexity for all” some decades ago, as she asserted. And I think this was primarily because watches and calendars kept on functioning. People still believed, with justified confidence, that they knew what hour and what day it was. The realisation that the meaningful content of the days of our world is increasingly resembling a kind of homage to the absurd is only now slowly beginning to dawn. For example, banks that have engaged in unscrupulous lending and investment practices are rewarded, while increasing numbers of people are made jobless, homeless, and desperate? This perplexing reality is beginning to sink in, and this “sinking in” may well foretell the survival of worldly time. In Arendt’s words, “no human world destined to outlast the short lifespan of mortals within it will ever be able to survive without [people] willing to do what Herodotus was the first to undertake consciously—namely…to say what is”.

In part because it is, from my perspective, so timely, in the following pages I seek to provide a phenomenological sketch of Arendt’s worldly time, or of the temporal condition of human beings in the world. Although Arendt never explicitly discussed this temporal condition, time and again she alluded to it—in terse, dense ways. Perhaps one reason she never focused directly upon it is that tellers of worldly time are, almost simultaneously, thinkers, judges, makers and actors; they do not fit neatly into any division within or between the vita contemplativa and the vita activa. More likely, to my mind, she did not analyse at length worldly time because it was so very close to home, a “something” through which her own “who-ness” was revealed. Given that this conundrum can never be resolved, however, I will begin with what is incontrovertibly to hand: four dense quotes from Arendt. Taken together they begin to tell the story of the telling together of worldly time.

The story reveals the meaning of what otherwise would remain an unbearable sequence of sheer happenings.

Everybody who tells a story of what happened to him [or her] half an hour ago on the street has got to put this story into shape. And this putting the story into shape is a form of thought.

The ‘completion,’ which indeed every enacted event must have in the minds of those who then are to tell the story and to convey its meaning, eluded them; and without this thinking completion after the act, without the articulation accompanied by remembrance, there simply was no story left that could be told.

Without [that]…which selects and names, which hands down and preserves, which indicates where the treasures are and what their worth is—there seems to be no willed continuity in time and hence, humanly speaking, neither past nor future.

While all four quotes are deeply significant illuminators of worldly time, I need to own up to the exercise of my editorial discretion. I removed the word “tradition” from the last quote and replaced it with [that]. I did so because with Arendt I fully agree that the thread or chain of the western cultural tradition has been broken and cannot be mended. Nevertheless, and again with Arendt, I do not believe the human capacity for judgement has been eradicated. Nor do I believe that the human capacity to tell stories and preserve them has evaporated. Instead, I think Arendt’s insights

14 Arendt, Between Past and Future, 229.
15 See Paul Ricœur, “Action, Story and History—On Re-reading The Human Condition”, Salmagundi 60 (1983), 60-72, for the first, and to this day one of the very few, analyses of “the most enduring features of the temporal condition of man [sic]” (60) in Arendt’s thought.
18 Arendt, Between Past and Future, 6.
19 Ibid., 5, emphasis added.
20 On the breaking of the thread of tradition see Arendt, Between Past and Future, 25, and Arendt, The Life of the Mind: Thinking, 212.
into the complexities of “willed continuity in time” transcend the function of tradition and are applicable to any attempt to tell worldly time together. As she put it at the conclusion to “Thinking”, in the absence of tradition what is lost is the “certainty of evaluation”.21 I take her point to be that the old evaluative forms and moulds, the old yardsticks may be gone, but the capacity to evaluate anew is not gone. The capacity to select and name anew, to tell the story of different treasures and their worth—this human capacity remains. The question is: will we exercise it? Put differently, what I have learned from Arendt is that in the absence of tradition it may well only be through enduring stories that meaningful continuity in worldly time can be created and maintained. What is noteworthy is that such stories are a tangible bridge between the vita contemplativa and the vita activa.

To explain briefly, no story about the world can be told unless and until a) an action or event occurs in the world and b) someone has thought about it, judged it worthy to be told, and then willed themselves to bring it into being through the physical act of setting it down on a page, or painting it, or sculpting it, or otherwise “reifying” that story into a durable, shareable object.22 The importance of such a combined mental and physical effort on the part of human beings lies in the fact that without such efforts, “the living activities of action, speech, and thought would lose their reality at the end of each process and disappear as though they had never been”.23 In other words, unless the “unbearable sequence of sheer happenings” which we experience fleetingly as participants and spectators in the world is told meaningfully together and tangibly added to the world in common, then we lose those happenings, meaning is evacuated from our worldly present, and we can neither envision nor promise ourselves to a shared, meaningful future. Or, without the presence of physically enduring manifestations of “willed continuity in time”, worldly time is at risk, and so too is meaningful human life.

That is, if our individual lifetimes are to be understood as unique, meaningful lives lived out in a rectilinear line from birth to death, and if the world in which we dwell is to include meaningful, as opposed to sheer and unrelenting, change, then there must be a more or less stable backdrop to our lives, against which we each stand out as “unique, unexchangeable, and unrepeatable entities”.24 This “backdrop” is the meaningful knitting together of disparate lives, words and deeds into a coherent and temporally expansive whole. Crucially, it is only within such a whole that any new event can even be recognised as a new, unexpected event. Apart from some kind of a meaningful whole, that is, each birth, each life and each event, whether word or deed, would simply be another meaningless component in an ongoing welter of “sound and fury, signifying nothing”.

One problem identified by Arendt is that worldly time is always precarious, always “out of joint”.25 The crux of the issue, as mentioned above, is the fact that the content of earthly time consists to a large extent of a variety of human actions, or words and deeds. These actions are, in and of themselves, frail to an extreme. By themselves they leave behind nothing, and are thus utterly dependent for their meaningful temporal endurance in a world on those who tell their stories and put them into reified form. That someone will tell the story of a worldly event is never certain. Nor is it certain that, once reified, the meaning of that event will in fact live on in the world. As Arendt put it in The Human Condition, “the materialization [actions] have to undergo in order to remain in the world at all is paid for in that always the ‘dead letter’ replaces something which grew out of and

21 Arendt, The Life of the Mind: Thinking, 212.
22 Arendt, The Human Condition, 95. See also Sara Heinämaa, “Future and Others”; in Birth, Death, and Femininity: Philosophies of Embodiment, ed. Robin May Schott (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2010), 38ff & 147.
23 Ibid., 95.
24 Ibid., 97.
for a fleeting moment indeed existed as the ‘living spirit’”\textsuperscript{26} But the “dead letter” which is a reified, materialised story is not necessarily entirely dead. Rather, it is possessed of “a deadness from which it can be rescued…when the dead letter comes again into contact with a life willing to resurrect it, although this resurrection of the dead shares with all living things that it, too, will die again”.\textsuperscript{27} In his “Introduction” to \textit{The Promise of Politics} Jerome Kohn describes most eloquently what is at stake in this relational process. “What is crucial for Arendt is that the specific meaning of an event that happened in the past remains potentially alive in the reproductive imagination. When that meaning, however much it may offend our moral sense, is reproduced in a story and experienced vicariously, it reclaims the depth of the world. Sharing vicarious experiences in this manner may be the most efficacious way of becoming reconciled to the past’s presence in the world”.\textsuperscript{28}

At a minimum it would seem that in order for worldly time to be kept alive there must be a rather constant stream of newcomers to the world who are willing to resurrect, with their own living spirit, dead letter stories of worldly deeds. I suspect that such commitment to (and experience of) keeping “the depth” of their world’s past alive flows into the present and is made manifest in those witnesses’ willingness and ability to identify current words and deeds which are deserving of their own stories and materialisations. This is not an easy endeavour. Tellers of meaningful worldly time must confront what is all too often an unbearable sequence of happenings, and by means of thinking completion put those happenings into shape. They must dare to select and to name, to honour that which is praiseworthy and to condemn that which is not. They must judge what to preserve, what to hand down. In so doing, they willfully, meaningfully re-constitute a world’s past and present, thereby affording the possibility, though not the certainty, of meaningful temporal continuity into the future.

As I conclude this brief sketch of worldly time, I cannot help but note that as I write these words great swathes of Cambodia and Thailand are under water. Wall Street is occupied, and the Great Wall of China is crumbling in spots. It is a matter of public record that a recent recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize has been ordering assassinations rather regularly—and they are being carried out as per his orders. Amidst this welter of happenings I remember and extend these words from Adrienne Rich: “when the staves of history fall awry and the barrel of time bursts apart, some turn to prayer, some to poetry”, yet others begin to tell the splinters of their time together again.\textsuperscript{29} To put it in the terms of this colloquium, whether they know it or not, those tellers of worldly time are responsible for keeping alive the temporal dimension of their life-world. Theirs is an always uncertain, always epic endeavour.

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\textsuperscript{26} Arendt, \textit{The Human Condition}, 95.
\textsuperscript{27} Ibid., 169.
\textsuperscript{28} Kohn, “Introduction”, xxi-xxii.
Arendt’s time concept should be understood as a significant and conscious departure from Being and Time. As long as the human condition itself is not changed, Arendt comments in the Prologue of The Human Condition, “those general human capacities which grow out of the human condition and are permanent cannot be irretrievably lost.” Like Machiavelli, whom she greatly admired, Arendt suggests that political bodies unlike human bodies can be reborn precisely because politics is not subject to the laws of mortality that govern organic existence. Politics is artifice, not nature. Sections of Peg Birmingham’s Hannah Arendt and Human Rights discuss Arendt and Heidegger’s theories of time. The Human Condition, first published in 1958, is Hannah Arendt’s account of how “human activities” should be and have been understood throughout Western history. Arendt is interested in the vita activa (active life) as contrasted with the vita contemplativa (contemplative life) and concerned that the debate over the relative status of the two has blinded us to important insights about the vita activa and the way in which it has changed since ancient times. She distinguishes three sorts of activity: 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, th Hannah Arendt on Human Nature vs. Culture, What Equality Really Means, and How Our Language Confers Reality Upon Our Experience. Lying in Politics: Hannah Arendt on Deception, Self-Deception, and the Psychology of Defactualization. Labors of Love. Famous Writers’ Sleep Habits vs. Literary Productivity, Visualized. Otherness in its most abstract form is found only in the sheer multiplication of inorganic objects, whereas all organic life already shows variations and distinctions, even between specimens of the same species. But only man can express this distinction and distinguish himself, and only he can communicate himself and not merely something—thirst or hunger, affection or hostility or fear.