

Exploring the Interplay between Inner Dialogue, Active Being, and Public Action: A Philosophical Analysis of Hannah Arendt's Concepts

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Abstract

*Hannah Arendt's political philosophy provides a deep and concise lens, through which we can interrogate the conditions of man's existence, particularly with her ideas about inner dialogue, active being, and public action. However, much of the current scholarship tends to treat these concepts in isolation, leading to incomplete interpretations that overlook their interconnectedness. This paper tackles the issue of the absence of a comprehensive analysis that brings these elements together, highlighting their profound implications for ethics and politics. The main goal is to investigate how inner dialogue underpins moral responsibility, how active being reflects the freedom and diversity of human life, and how public action represents the culmination of thought and practice within the shared political arena. Methodologically, this study employs a hermeneutic and conceptual analysis of Arendt's key works, *The Human Condition*, *The Life of the Mind*, and *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, while also engaging with critical secondary literature to interpret her ideas in relation to one another. The findings indicate that inner dialogue acts as a protective measure against the perils of thoughtlessness and moral failure, active being embodies the creative potential of new beginnings and freedom, and public action reveals human identity within the delicate yet essential space of visibility. The contribution of this paper lies in its development of a cohesive framework, illustrating that the interaction of thought, being, and action provides valuable insights for addressing modern challenges in democratic accountability, ethical decision-making, and civic duty.*

Keywords: Hannah Arendt, Inner Dialogue, Active Being, Public Action, Political Philosophy, Ethics, Plurality

Introduction

Hannah Arendt stands out as an impactful philosopher, especially when it comes to her insights on human action, freedom, and the dynamics of political life. In her notable works like *The Human Condition* (1958) and *The Life of the Mind* (1978), Arendt makes a clear distinction between various modes of man's existence. Arendt's work highlights how crucial thinking and judgment are in upholding moral responsibility. Her examination of Adolf Eichmann in *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (1963) powerfully illustrates the perils of thoughtlessness, introducing the now-iconic concept of the "banality of evil." Collectively, these writings showcase Arendt's lasting concern with how inner reflection, active participation, and the public realm are intertwined.

Even with the depth of Arendt's philosophy, much of the scholarship surrounding her work has tended to treat her ideas about inner dialogue, active existence, and public action as separate entities. Researchers have delved deeply into her theory of action and the "space of appearance" (Canovan, 1992; Villa, 1996), or focused on her thoughts regarding thinking and judgment (Bernstein, 2010; Benhabib, 2003).

However, few have sought to explore these concepts as interconnected aspects of human experience. This fragmentation risks missing Arendt's profound insight: that ethical reflection, ontological freedom, and political action are all part of a cohesive whole.

The aim of this paper is to offer a philosophical exploration of how inner dialogue, active existence, and public action interact within Arendt's framework. It posits that inner dialogue serves as the ethical bedrock of action, active existence captures the creative and diverse potential of human life, and public action embodies the realization of reflection and practice in the shared political landscape.

The importance of the paper is to add to Arendtian scholarship, by clarifying the interdependence of these categories; it seeks to enrich our understanding of Arendt's thought and its relevance today.

Inner Dialogue

Arendt's thoughts dwell richly on thinking of the concept of inner dialogue, that quiet conversation we have with ourselves. She really dives into this idea in her book, *The Life of the Mind* (1978), where she leans on Socratic philosophy to suggest that thinking isn't just about chasing universal truths; it's more about having a reflective chat with oneself. According to Arendt, these self-dialogue acts as a safeguard against moral failure, allowing individuals to reflect on their actions before stepping out into the world (Arendt, 1978). The Socratic saying, "it is better to suffer wrong than to do wrong", echoes in Arendt's argument that those who don't engage in critical thinking are at a higher risk of doing evil, as illustrated in her examination of Eichmann's "thoughtlessness" (Eichmann in Jerusalem, 1963). So, inner dialogue serves as a protective measure for our conscience and lays the groundwork for moral accountability (Benhabib, 2003; Bernstein, 2010).

Arendt's idea of active being is deeply connected to her well-known discussion of the *Vita Activa in The Human Condition* (1958). In this article, she breaks down three essential activities of man, which are, labor, work, and action. Labor is tied to our biological needs and the repetitive cycles of survival; work is about creating lasting objects and shaping a human-made environment; and action involves

the interactions among people in a diverse society (Arendt, 1958). For Arendt, active being embodies the essence of human freedom through what she calls natality, the ability to start fresh. This focus on new beginnings highlights her belief that human life isn't set in stone but is open to creative possibilities (Villa, 1996). In this light, active being forms the foundational aspect of human diversity and political life.

The pinnacle of the *vita activa* is public action, where individuals reveal themselves through their words and deeds. Arendt describes action as taking place in the "space of appearance", the arena where people come together to engage with one another (Arendt, 1958). Unlike labor or work, action is unpredictable and irreversible, yet it is through such action that freedom and identity are realized. Public action depends on plurality—the coexistence of diverse perspectives—and makes possible both political community and historical remembrance (Canovan, 1992; Habermas, 1983). Speech is discussed in Arendt's conception as very important to action, for it is through dialogue and narrative that man expresses what makes him different.

The idea of conceptual categories of Arendt are deeply indebted to classical and modern philosophical traditions. From Socrates, she inherits the notion of thinking as dialogue, grounding her emphasis on conscience and responsibility. From Augustine, she borrows the idea of natality, which she transforms into a political category emphasizing the capacity for new beginnings (Arendt, 1978). Heidegger's existential ontology influenced her understanding of being-in-the-world and temporality, though she diverged from his focus on mortality by emphasizing birth and plurality (Villa, 1996). Finally, the legacy of classical Greek thought—particularly Aristotle's distinction between *theoria*, *praxis*, and *poiesis*—frames her interpretation of political action as the highest human activity (Arendt, 1958; Canovan, 1992).

By clarifying these categories and their philosophical roots, we can better appreciate how inner dialogue, active being, and public action form an interconnected framework in Arendt's thought.

Inner Dialogue As Basis for Moral Responsibility

Arendt's idea of inner dialogue is key to grasping the ethical side of her political philosophy. In her book, *The Life of the Mind* (1978), she points out that thinking activities are not just passively soaking up information; it's an active, ongoing conversation we have with ourselves. This self-talk, inspired by the Socratic tradition, lays the groundwork for our conscience and moral judgment. As Arendt notes, Socrates believed that thinking acts as a safeguard against wrongdoing: when we engage in this inner dialogue, we avoid the conflict between what we say and what we do, thus maintaining our integrity (Arendt, 1978; Bernstein, 2010).

The importance of inner dialogue really shines through in Arendt's discussion of the ordinariness of evil in *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (1963), she observed that Adolf Eichmann's heinous acts weren't fueled by a monstrous desire but rather by a failure—or refusal—to think critically about his choices. Eichmann's "thoughtlessness" illustrated how a lack of inner dialogue can lead to a devastating moral failure. As Arendt pointed out, his downfall wasn't due to ignorance of moral principles but rather his inability to engage in self-reflective judgment (Arendt, 1963).

This perspective highlights that inner dialogue acts as a safeguard against blind conformity and obedience. By taking the time for self-reflection, individuals develop what Arendt (1978) calls the ability to live with them, ensuring their actions are in line with their conscience. For her, the act of thinking is deeply intertwined with moral responsibility: those who engage in thought cannot commit evil without ultimately becoming their own accusers.

Other commentators support this view. Benhabib (2003) argues that Arendt's focus on thinking connects ethics and politics by rooting responsibility in the individual's reflective life. Likewise, Villa (1996) points out that Arendt's use of the Socratic model places moral responsibility not in following external laws but in the inner capacities of individuals. Inner dialogue isn't just a mental exercise; it's a deeply ethical endeavor. It helps us avoid moral pitfalls, roots our sense of responsibility in self-reflection, and lays the groundwork for genuine action in the public sphere.

Active Being Products of Freedom and Natality

Hannah Arendt's idea of active being really comes to life in her book, *The Human Condition* (1958), where she lays out the framework of the *vita activa*. She identifies three key forms of human activity: labor, which keeps our biological life going through necessary cycles; work, which produces lasting creations and builds a human-made environment; and action, which unfolds in a community through our words and deeds (Arendt, 1958). Together, these activities show that human existence goes beyond just surviving; it's about our ability to shape, renew, and reveal the world around us.

At the heart of Arendt's view on active being is the idea of natality, a concept she takes from Augustine but reinterprets in a political context. While much of Western philosophy, particularly through Heidegger, focuses on mortality as the core aspect of existence, Arendt (1958) contends that birth—the fact that we come into the world as fresh starts—is just as crucial. Natality represents our human ability to initiate change, to start over, and to push back against deterministic forces. In the political sphere, this means that every person has the potential to bring something new into our shared reality, embodying true freedom.

For Arendt, freedom isn't just an internal state or a metaphysical quality; it's an experience grounded in our active interactions with others. As Villa (1996) points out, Arendt sees freedom in the realm of action, where individuals, by engaging with one another, reveal their uniqueness and affirm the openness of the human experience. Active being thus connects the fundamental truth of natality with the political reality of plurality, laying the groundwork for democratic renewal.

In this light, active being isn't about passive existence or abstract freedom; it's the real-life expression of human diversity and creativity in the world. By emphasizing natality, Arendt offers a powerful counterbalance to deterministic views of history and politics. She shines a light on the openness of human experiences and the endless potential for fresh starts.

Public Action As a Medium of Appearance

For Arendt, public action is the pinnacle of what

it means to live actively. In her book, *The Human Condition* (1958), she makes a clear distinction between action, labor, and work, highlighting the political essence of action. Unlike labor, which is tied to necessity, and work, which is about creating objects, action happens directly between people, without any intermediary. It's through action—especially through our words and deeds—that we express who we are, showcase our individuality, and build connections with others (Arendt, 1958).

The setting for this action is what Arendt refers to as the “space of appearance.” This isn't a physical place; rather, it's a public sphere that comes to life whenever people gather to communicate and act (Arendt, 1958). In this space, freedom is both realized and nurtured through our interactions. So, public action isn't just about achieving results; it's fundamental to the very essence of political life. Canovan (1992) emphasizes that for Arendt, politics is less about structures or policies and more about the vibrant process of people engaging with one another through speech and action.

Speech plays a crucial role in public action, according to Arendt, man has great opportunity to express his viewpoint, share his story, and integrate his identity into a collective narrative. Habermas (1983) sees Arendt's focus on speech as a foundation for deliberative democracy, where communicative action fosters understanding and legitimacy. However, Arendt also recognizes the dangers that come with public action: its unpredictability, irreversibility, and potential for violence. Yet, it's precisely these risks that highlight the delicate yet essential nature of human freedom.

In conclusion, according to Arendt, public action embodies the essence of political anthropology. Within the space of appearance, through our speech and actions, our personal reflection and active existence come together in a shared political life.

The Connection between Inner Dialogue, Active Being, and Public Action

Hannah Arendt's concepts of inner dialogue, active being, and public action are often examined in isolation, but their true importance shines through when we look at how they relate to each other. Together, they create a vibrant journey that moves

from ethical contemplation to our very essence and ultimately to political engagement.

Inner dialogue serves as the ethical backbone of Arendt's ideas. By having a Socratic conversation with ourselves, we nurture our conscience and take on the responsibility to reflect on our actions before stepping into the public sphere (Arendt, 1978). This inner work is crucial; it prevents political action from becoming mindless, as seen in Eichmann's lack of judgment (Arendt, 1963). In this way, our thinking lays the groundwork for moral accountability.

Active being, expressed through the *vita activa*, embodies the human experience of diversity and freedom. Through labor, work, and especially action, we tap into our ability to create new beginnings and push back against deterministic forces (Arendt, 1958). Inner dialogue supports active being by ensuring that our freedom and creativity are exercised with care.

Public action represents the peak of this journey. In the public realm, our inner thoughts and active capabilities come to life through our words and actions. Here, freedom transforms into a tangible reality, and our individuality is revealed within the collective (Canovan, 1992). Public action allows the ethical strength cultivated by inner dialogue and the openness of active being to flourish in our shared political existence.

The interplay of these concepts emphasizes Arendt's vision of a comprehensive human experience: reflection, being, and action are intertwined aspects of our lives. As Villa (1996) points out, this unity reinforces Arendt's belief that political life relies on both the private work of conscience and the public exercise of freedom. The interconnectedness of these elements is essential to understanding our human condition.

Critical Reflections and Contemporary Relevance

Arendt's framework of inner dialogue, active being, and public action offers a compelling lens through which to view the human experience, but it's not without its complexities and shortcomings. A closer look at her ideas reveals both the strengths of her philosophical approach and its ongoing significance in addressing today's challenges.

One of the key strengths is Arendt's belief that ethical responsibility starts with thought. Her

examination of Eichmann's "thoughtlessness" shows how a lack of critical thinking can lead to catastrophic political outcomes (Arendt, 1963). In our current landscape of mass media, algorithm-driven content, and the rapid flow of information, the risk of thoughtless conformity is more urgent than ever. This makes inner dialogue crucial for nurturing democratic citizens who can think for themselves (Benhabib, 2003).

Arendt's idea of active being also stands in contrast to deterministic views that reduce human existence to mere biological survival or economic necessity. By rooting freedom in natality, the ability to start anew, she highlights human creativity and diversity (Arendt, 1958). This perspective resonates strongly in today's discussions about social renewal, resistance movements, and migration politics, where individuals and communities continually assert their agency despite facing structural challenges (Honig, 1993).

However, Arendt's emphasis on public action has faced criticism for romanticizing political spaces. Her view, especially in her article like *The Human Condition and On Revolution*, has sparked some debate. Critics such as Jürgen Habermas (1983) and Margaret Canovan (1992) argue that Arendt's enthusiasm for public action and discussion misses the mark by ignoring the structural and material conditions that enable such political involvement. Yet, there are compelling philosophical and interpretive points that can be made in defense of Arendt's views.

Arendt wasn't trying to lay out a sociological blueprint for how politics operates; instead, she was expressing how politics should ideally function in its most authentic and human form. Her ideas about action and public space embody an ideal vision of freedom and diversity, they're not just historical accounts. She aimed to reclaim the moral and existential significance of politics, transcending bureaucratic and economic limitations. So, her "romanticism" can be seen as a form of philosophical idealism, intended to motivate civic participation rather than dismiss the realities of material conditions.

While it may seem like Arendt downplays the importance of institutions, she actually reimagines them as arenas for action rather than just bureaucratic

tools. In *On Revolution*, she highlights American town halls and councils as institutional representations of public freedom. Her caution is directed at institutions that suppress spontaneity and diversity, not institutions in general. Thus, her critique is more about quality than an outright rejection. Importance of institutions or socio-economic factors (Habermas, 1983; Canovan, 1992).

Arendt's concept of freedom is ontological, not economic. Many critics tend to interpret Arendt through a Marxist perspective, anticipating that she will address socio-economic inequality as the foundation of politics. However, Arendt intentionally distinguishes between the social question (necessity) and the political question (freedom). For her, it's crucial that the political sphere remains independent from necessity to safeguard true freedom and meaningful deliberation. This distinction upholds the dignity of human action, preventing it from being reduced to mere labor or consumption. The aim isn't to overlook inequality but to maintain a space where individuals can see each other as equals, regardless of their economic circumstances.

Arendt's idea of the *vita activa* highlights action as the sole way through which human plurality and identity come to light. By focusing on appearance and dialogue, she offers a humanistic perspective on politics as a means of self-revelation and mutual acknowledgment. This focus stands in opposition to modern technocracy and depoliticization, it's not about denying structure, but rather defending meaning and active participation.

While Habermas views politics as rational communication within established frameworks, Arendt sees it as spontaneous action among equals. Habermas's procedural rationality risks turning politics into a bureaucratic process, whereas Arendt champions its creative and unpredictable nature. For her, political life isn't solely about reaching consensus; it's about acting in plurality, welcoming disagreement and unpredictability as essential aspects of freedom.

Finally, Her "Romanticism" serves as a unique lens for critique. In fact, what some might refer to as "romanticization" can also be seen as a purposeful challenge, a way to highlight the stark contrast between today's feelings of alienation and a bygone

sense of shared existence (*welt*). By putting the polis or the revolutionary councils on a pedestal, Arendt emphasizes just how far modern society has strayed from authentic political involvement. This “romance” is therefore more of a diagnostic tool and a critique rather than a simple longing for the past.

Her concept of the “space of appearance” can be adapted to our digital era, where online platforms create new, albeit fragile, spaces for collective expression and action. While these digital public spheres are susceptible to surveillance and manipulation, they also illustrate how plurality and openness remain vital to political life (Dean, 2009).

In summary, Arendt’s categories provide a rich foundation for understanding the complexities of our time, encouraging us to engage thoughtfully and actively in the world around us. By connecting the dots between reflection, freedom, and action, her ideas create a solid foundation for pushing back against authoritarianism and breathing new life into democratic practices, whether in our physical spaces or online communities.

Conclusion

In this paper, we’ve explored the intricate relationship between inner dialogue, active being, and public action as seen through the lens of Hannah Arendt’s philosophy. These elements are deeply interconnected and remain relevant today. Arendt places inner dialogue at the heart of ethical responsibility, arguing that living an examined life—drawing from the Socratic tradition—helps us avoid moral failures that stem from thoughtlessness (Arendt, 1963). Without this internal conversation, our actions can easily slip into mere conformity instead of being a true expression of our freedom.

The idea of active being, which she elaborates on through her concept of the *vita activa*, emphasizes that human existence goes beyond just labor or productivity. It’s fundamentally tied to our ability for natality, or the potential for new beginnings (Arendt, 1958). This creative aspect connects our thoughts to our actions, reminding us that we can renew ourselves even in times of crisis or limitation.

Lastly, Arendt’s emphasis on public action highlights inherently, political nature of man’s life, which is rooted in plurality, communication,

and shared responsibility. Public spaces, whether they are traditional civic forums or modern digital platforms—create a “space of appearance” where individuals can express their identities through their words and actions, thereby upholding democracy and pushing back against authoritarianism (Canovan, 1992; Benhabib, 2003).

Together, these concepts offer a rich framework for understanding the ethical, existential, and political aspects of human life. They underscore that responsible action demands both thoughtful judgment and active engagement in public matters. In a time marked by political division, environmental challenges, and digital change, Arendt’s philosophy provides a vital lens for rethinking freedom, accountability, and civic duty.

Recommendations

Diving into Arendt’s ideas—inner dialogue, active being, and public action—opens up exciting avenues for both theory and practice. Although her framework stems from the political landscape of the mid-20th century, it still offers valuable insights for tackling today’s challenges in fresh ways.

To start, researchers could take Arendt’s concept of inner dialogue and apply it to our digital age, where constant connectivity and algorithm-driven content can stifle reflective thought. There’s a lot to explore regarding how digital overload impacts our moral decision-making and how we might foster critical thinking in both education and civic engagement (Benhabib, 2003).

Next, Arendt’s idea of active being could find a new home in ecological philosophy. Her notion of natality resonates with today’s urgent calls for sustainability and environmental renewal, providing a moral compass for addressing the climate crisis (Canovan, 1992). Future inquiries might consider: How can Arendt’s focus on new beginnings inspire ecological movements in our current era, the Anthropocene?

Additionally, the idea of public action deserves a closer look, especially in global and African contexts. While Arendt focused on the Greek polis and modern Western democracies, applying her thoughts to African communal philosophies (like Ubuntu) or indigenous deliberative models could create rich,

hybrid ethical frameworks that enhance global democratic theory (Wiredu, 1996; Mbiti, 1990).

Lastly, interdisciplinary research could delve into what Arendt's "space of appearance" means for online activism, transnational movements, and global citizenship. This would enrich the conversation between philosophy, political science, and media studies. By weaving Arendt's concepts into contemporary issues across various cultures and fields, scholars can broaden the impact of her ideas, ensuring they remain relevant to the challenges we face today.

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