

The Midwest Faculty Seminar  
presents  
**The Human Condition**  
November 5-7, 2009

Hannah Arendt is perhaps best known popularly for her writings on totalitarian regimes and her use of “the banality of evil” to describe Eichmann and Nazism in general. A German-Jewish political philosopher who fled the Nazi regime for France and, later, the United States, Arendt’s most influential work is arguably the landmark 1958 text *The Human Condition*. This book is equally shaped by her earlier experiences with the terrors of despotic government, although it does not explicitly address them.

*The Human Condition* begins with a simple proposal: to “think what we are doing.” To enact this simple but highly ambitious project, Arendt approaches human societies in their plurality, attempting to understand political action and social understanding not in terms of the abstract collective entity “Man” but rather as a gathering of individuals: “men.” Within this massive conglomeration of disparate, unique men and women that make up each society, Arendt stresses, lies a fundamental unpredictability that belies previous attempts by political scientists and philosophers to analyze the behavior of the masses as a single, predictable entity. For Arendt, each individual is capable of political action, and it is only through this action, together in the public realm, that societies can effect change.

Arendt’s emphasis is on conscious action, which she distinguishes from mere behavior, as opposed to the traditional philosophical tendency to privilege contemplation and the ideal. In her quest to examine society’s potential activities and the fundamental nature of the human condition, Arendt’s schema addresses three proposed varieties of the *vita activa* and their role within the political, social, public and private realms. These activities – labor, work, and action – define man’s relationship to the natural, biological world, the constructed or artificial world, and the capacity to act within each. Arendt understood action as a beginning of sorts, and so approaches activity for its generative qualities that suggest natality – rather than mortality – as a fundamental characteristic of human social psychology.

Basing her analysis in both a historical account of Classical Greece and her acute insights into contemporary modernity, Arendt’s diagnosis of the state of humanity has become an essential text for a variety of disciplines as a work of philosophy, political science, history and literature. This seminar will explore Arendt’s contributions to 20<sup>th</sup> century thought through this controversial, hugely influential work of political and social philosophy, and the work’s relevance to contemporary discussion. Participants will discuss both the ideas put forth in this work and the book’s rhetorical structure, analyzing *The Human Condition* as a work of literature as well as theory. Speakers will include: Patchen Markell (Political Science) and Susanne Lüdemann (Germanics). The completed list will be sent out in the coming weeks.