

**Introduction to Cultural Studies**  
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**Lecture - 26**  
**Hannah Arendt - The Human Condition 1**

So hello and welcome to this NPTEL course Introduction to Cultural Studies where we begin with a new text today, Hannah Arendt – The Human Condition, which is quite possibly one of the most you know widely read and is really a classic in terms of culture studies text. It does several things, Hannah Arendt – The Human Condition. It talks about culture as a condition, culture as an activity, culture as an artifact.

It talks about the unnaturalness of culture as a design artifact which is designed through different human activities and it talks about human work, labor and activity as separate categories which are all equally invested into the formation of culture. So it really gives a very complex definition of culture which is quite useful to us today.

And in several ways is a very prophetic text like Lyotard's Postmodern Condition which we saw when we read that you know how Lyotard appears to anticipate some of the attributes of the culture that we inhabit today in terms of looking at micro narratives, language games, etc. the demise of the grand narrative. So something similar happens in this book as well which is one of the reasons why we in culture studies we keep going back to this book as one of those classics you know for students of culture studies, the human condition.

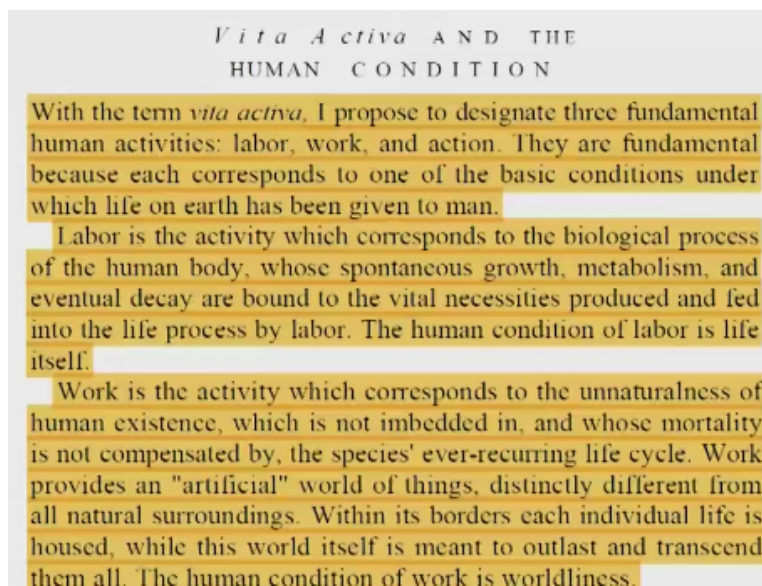
So among the many things which this book does it gives a very interesting critique of Marx, a very interesting critique of Hegel, a very interesting critique of Kant. It gives you a very interesting definition of public space and private space and how the two are invested into each other and how the human condition that we live today and obviously by today Arendt means the 20th century.

How that sees the increase in demise of the public space and the rise of the private space as the only the only recourse of the individual. The only place where individual can assert some agency

is the private space. So the public space disappears in Arendt's reading. And again in that sense we can connect Arendt presumably with the idea of Habermas, the Habermasian idea of public space, the public square and the Lyotard's critique of the same.

So it is a book the human condition is a book which we will find resonances in various other texts that we have done and will do in this particular course, Introduction to Cultural Studies. So I will dive right into the text. This is the beginning of the human condition, the very opening chapter which should be on your screen highlighted in yellow. It is called Vita Activa and the Human Condition.

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So and the vital activity and the human condition. So with the term *vita activa*, this is Arendt defining, opening the very book you know the first sentence of the book with the term *vita activa*, I propose to designate three fundamental human activities, labor, work and action. So you know at the very outset we have very radical kind of a retelling of human activity, of human condition by mapping out, by sort of you know demarcating 3 activities, labor, work and action.

And she will go on to define the differences between these 2 categories in due course. They are fundamental because each corresponds to one of the basic conditions under which life on earth has been given to man. So life in the way that Arendt defines it is an entanglement of biological

activity and cultural activity, an entanglement of natural, metabolic, organic activity and unnatural artificial activity which becomes an artifact in its own right.

So this artifact quality of culture is something that Arendt constantly highlights throughout this text and it is a very interesting highlighting I would argue. So what is labor. So first she defines labor and then she goes on to define the two other categories, work and action. So labor is the activity which corresponds to the biological process of the human body, whose spontaneous growth, metabolism and eventual decay are bound to the vital necessities produced and fed into the life processes by labor. The human condition of labor is life itself.

So labor she defines as a basic biological activity, the metabolic activity which includes birth, growth, reproduction, decay and eventual demise. So labor is the very core biological rim of human life, right. So that is the first thing. So you can see there is some structural similarities between this Marxist idea of base superstructure over here as well. But of course Arendt would go on to revise and critique Marxism to a great extent. It is a very important critique as well which we will see as we move on in this particular text.

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human activities: labor, work, and action. They are fundamental because each corresponds to one of the basic conditions under which life on earth has been given to man.

Labor is the activity which corresponds to the biological process of the human body, whose spontaneous growth, metabolism, and eventual decay are bound to the vital necessities produced and fed into the life process by labor. The human condition of labor is life itself.

Work is the activity which corresponds to the unnaturalness of human existence, which is not imbedded in, and whose mortality is not compensated by, the species' ever-recurring life cycle. Work provides an "artificial" world of things, distinctly different from all natural surroundings. Within its borders each individual life is housed, while this world itself is meant to outlast and transcend them all. The human condition of work is worldliness.

Action, the only activity that goes on directly between men without the intermediary of things or matter, corresponds to the human condition of plurality, to the fact that men, not Man, live on the earth and inhabit the world. While all aspects of the human condition are somehow related to politics, this plurality is specifically *the condition*—not only the *conditio sine qua non*, but

Work, so what is work, the second category that she defines. Work is the activity which corresponds to the unnaturalness of human existence, which is not imbedded in, and whose mortality is not compensated by, the species ever-recurring life cycle. So work is different from

labor. So if labor is biological, if labor is metabolic biological activity, work is the unnaturalness of human existence, the artificiality around us.

So by artificiality of course culture can be read as an artificial artifact that we consume, that we create as well as consume in our daily discourses of life. So culture can be seen as an artifact. Culture could be seen as an unnatural activity etc. So work provides an artificial world of things, distinctly different from all natural surroundings. So she constantly highlights the artificiality of work. So what is work?

So this is obviously I mean these are ontological divisions that she is offering us. So the very important ontological divisions, so if life is, if labor is the biological activity which constitutes life, constitutes growth, constitutes a cellular mechanism through which we live, breathe, reproduce, decay and die. Work is the artificial activity which is outside the biological parameter.

So the artificiality, the unnaturalness, the discursive quality of work is something which is highlighted over here. So this is an artificial map that you know is created is designed through work as an activity which is different from the natural world the natural rim. The natural rim would constitute would include the human body, the human organs, the human cells, the cellular reproduction etc.

Now work provides an artificial world of things, distinctly different from all natural surroundings. Within its borders each individual life is housed, while this world itself is meant to outlast and transcend them all. The human condition of work is worldliness. So this is a very complex definition of work. So she says work is something which is meant to outlast the individual right.

So the artificiality around us the culture around us which is obviously read as an artifact by Arendt over here it will obviously outlast in a very strictly temporal sense it will outlast the individual who is bound by labor, who is bound by the biological process of birth, decay, growth and eventual demise. So work would outlast that activity. So work is an activity which is unnatural in quality, which is designed towards artificiality.

So some activity which is designed to produce artificiality, an artificial apparatus around us which you consume as culture, which you create as culture, construct as culture as well as consume as culture and interestingly this would itself is meant to outlast and transcend them all. You know it is meant to transcend the entire idea of labor, the entire idea of biological procreation, the biological activity etc.

So once reminded in a certain sense of this idea of mortality the idea of the anxiety of mortality that keeps coming up in different philosophical discourses and different literary discourses as well. For instance one can think of Shakespeare sonnets whose constant refrain is the idea of anxiety of the passing away of life, the mortality of life, the very temporal quality of life, the finitude of life in a sense and how best to confront the finitude, how best to confront the idea of mortality, right.

And you know in the end Shakespeare, the speaker in Shakespeare's sonnets rather and the speaker asserts that only through the idea of culture only through the idea of art as an activity can be possibly transcend the eventual and imminent and unavoidable biological decay. So long as you know this lives and this gives life to these.

The closing lines of the sonnet, the very famous sonnet by Shakespeare where he actually says that this activity that I have created, this artificial activity which is a sonnet you know this poem that I have created, this will outlast me as you know I am a (( )) (08:33) I might decay and I will die at some point. It is inevitable and you know our human relationships will also die that way. But what will outlast us you know is this artificial sonnet which will live on forever and as long as men read the sonnet this will give life to the addressee.

So that is an interesting analogy that you can bring in terms of looking at Arendt's idea of work as an activity. So action, the third category that Arendt you know highlights at the very beginning of this book, action the only activity that goes on directly between men without the intermediary of things or matter corresponds to the human condition of plurality to the fact that men, not man live on the earth and inhabit the world.

While all aspects of the human condition are somehow related to politics this plurality is specifically the condition, the condition not only the condition sine qua non but the condition per quam of all political life. So this is the extremely essential condition that Arendt points out at the very beginning of this book the idea of plurality and that itself is a very interesting definition and she goes on to say the action produces plurality right.

So action is the very intersubjective phenomenon, the very intersubjective activity that goes on between men and that is designed towards plurality which will produce plurality etc. which becomes an extremely essential condition, the vital condition as it were for politics, for political life, political discourses. The organic quality of politics is derived from this plurality. There is no plurality that we know politics at all.

So just to summarize the very beginning of this particular book, a very important book, Arendt maps out 3 different categories of human condition. The first is labor which is a biological category, the purely biological category of birth, growth, decay and death. Work is the activity which produces the unnatural apparatus which we call culture. Action is the activity that goes on between men right.

So one might define action as a intersubjective activity that goes on between men and intersubjective activity that is designed to produce and promote plurality right. So plurality becomes a very key category in Arendt's definition and is something that she keeps coming back to throughout this thesis, okay.

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that the multitude of human beings becomes the result of multiplication.<sup>1</sup> Action would be an unnecessary luxury, a capricious interference with general laws of behavior, if men were endlessly reproducible repetitions of the same model, whose nature or essence was the same for all and as predictable as the nature or essence of any other thing. Plurality is the condition of human action because we are all the same, that is, human, in such a way that nobody is ever the same as anyone else who ever lived, lives, or will live.

All three activities and their corresponding conditions are intimately connected with the most general condition of human existence: birth and death, natality and mortality. Labor assures not only individual survival, but the life of the species. Work and its product, the human artifact, bestow a measure of permanence and durability upon the futility of mortal life and the fleeting character of human time. Action, in so far as it engages in founding and pre-

1. In the analysis of postclassical political thought, it is often quite illuminating to find out which of the two biblical versions of the creation story is cited. Thus it is highly characteristic of the difference between the teaching of Jesus of Nazareth and of Paul that Jesus, discussing the relationship between man and wife, refers to Genesis 1:27: "Have ye not read, that he which made *them* at the

And then on the next page which is again highlighted and should be on your screen, she goes on to define action, sort of give a more complex definition of action. So she qualifies action as the following phrase. Action would be an unnecessary luxury, a capricious interference with general laws of behavior if men were endlessly reproducible repetitions of the same model, whose nature or essence was the same for all and as predictable as the nature or essence of any other thing.

Plurality is the condition of human action because we are all the same, that is human is such a way that nobody is ever the same as anyone else who ever lived, lives, or will live. So connected with the idea of plurality is the idea of uniqueness, the idea of individuality. So action is linked to individuality in Arendt's thesis over here and she says the action is the essential quality through which we produce something different from our predecessor.

So if we are to be the same model if we are to be the repetitions of the early generations over and over again there will be no need for action. We can just do with labor, the purely biological activity of birth, growth, decay, and you know demise. We can just do with that. But the fact that we need action is because action produces plurality, action produces individuality, action produces uniqueness which is obviously invested in the definition of culture, in the idea of culture, in the growth and this organic quality of culture.

So all three activities and their corresponding conditions are intimately connected with the most general condition of human existence, birth and decay, natality and mortality, right. So the very basic conditions of life birth and decay, natality you know the process of being born and mortality the process of death, so these are conditions which are connected with these three activities; intimately connected, organically connected.

Labor assures not only individual survival but the life of the species. So at a very core biological level, labor is a biological activity which you know oversees birth, growth, reproduction, decay, and demise. So that is a rim which ensures, which guarantees the survival of a species. If there is no labor as Arendt defines it there will be no survival for species. The species would die a natural death with if there is no biological activity involved.

Work and its product, the human artifact bestow a measure of permanence and durability upon the futility of mortal life and the fleeting character of human time. So again this is what I meant when I spent some time little while ago talking about the Shakespeare sonnets because that is a constant refrain in Shakespeare sonnets that how to best combat mortality how to best resist mortality and you cannot resist it literally because all of us are going to die you know is part of a cellular mechanism that we would decay and demise at some point.

But the only way in which you can leave a mark, which might be permanent in the long run in terms of the human narrative is through you know this idea of labor, not the idea of labor, the idea of work, the idea of producing an artificial apparatus which will outlast you as an individual right. So this artificial commodity it could be a poem, it could be an invention, it could be an artifact, it could be an object. So that will outlast you.

You know, you the individual you know you are going to die, all of us this mortals are going to die. Mortality is a basic condition, the essential condition of human kind. But work can give a sense of permanence to this entire idea of mortality. You know it gives a sense of durability upon the futility of mortal life and a fleeting character of human time. So the human time has a quality of fleeting character.



So it is constantly slipping away, it is constantly passing away. So work can only give a sense of durability or maybe an illusion perhaps of durability through which we can gain some sense of significance, some sense of you know meaningfulness. Otherwise, everything else will be futile. If you just **if you just** less from labor which is about you know being born and then growing and then dying then there would be no meaning to life as well.

I mean it will just be constant repetition of the same cycle. But the fact that we have culture, the fact that we have work through which we can create something artificial which will outlast us is something which gives a sense of optimism and durability to human life. The third category, action. So action in so far as it engages in founding and okay so action. Action would be in so far as it engages in founding and preserving you know political bodies, creates the condition for remembrance that is for history.

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serving political bodies, creates the condition for remembrance, that is, for history. Labor and work, as well as action, are also rooted in natality in so far as they have the task to provide and preserve the world for, to foresee and reckon with, the constant influx of newcomers who are born into the world as strangers. However, of the three, action has the closest connection with the human condition of natality; the new beginning inherent in birth can make itself felt in the world only because the newcomer possesses the capacity of beginning something anew, that is, of acting. In this sense of initiative, an element of action, and therefore of natality, is inherent in all human activities. Moreover, since action is the political activity par excellence, natality, and not mortality, may be the central category of political, as distinguished from metaphysical, thought.

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 imme-

So action is related to history, you know action is related to remembrance. So again if you remember Arendt had defined action as what goes on between men. Action as a producer of plurality. Action as a producer of you know uniqueness of individuality right. So action creates a condition for remembrance that is for history. So labor and work as well as action are also rooted in natality in so far as they have to task to provide and preserve the world for to foresee and reckon with the constant influx of newcomers who are born into the world as strangers.

So the idea of culture over here becomes very interesting because culture is an apparatus which is designed to sort of welcome, to take in newcomers. So newcomers obviously mean you know she is referring to natality over here, people who are being born, human beings who are being born into culture so in that sense work and action become very important in terms of creating the environment which welcome and incorporate the human beings who are brought to be born.

However, of the three action has a closet connection with the human condition of natality. The new beginning inherent in birth can make itself felt in the world only because the newcomer possesses the capacity for beginning something anew that is of acting. So if at a conceptual level, if you are to associate agency you know and if you are asked a question where would agency fit in best in these 3 categories, labor, work, and action the obvious answer would be action.

Because action is that kind of an activity which will produce uniqueness, which will give you a sense of purpose, which will give which will enable you to invent a pattern through which you interact with other human beings. So action is most organically related to agency over here right. So because that is how you can make, you can interact with other human beings at an intersubjective level.

Moreover since action is a political activity par excellence, natality and not mortality may be the central category of political as distinguished from metaphysical thought, right. So this is one of the reasons why at the very outset we see the radical quality of this book where she says that natality and not mortality is the central category of political. So birth becomes a political process rather than a metaphysical process.

So she is completely doing away with this metaphysical, philosophical understanding of birth but rather looking at birth as an activity as you know as an **as an** event which is deeply discursive in quality, which is deeply political in quality because that is an initiator into action. That is an initiator into an artificial apparatus from where you can sort of produce action.

So if we can relate this to the idea of language games that Lyotard talked about in *The Postmodern Condition*, where he said something quite similar at least at the structural level

where he said that we are all born into language games but through agency lies in this your navigation through language games, your navigation through rules of the game and something similar was asserted by Butler as well, Judith Butler where she said that agency is not prediscursive or metadiscursive in quality.

Agency is a recognition of discursivity and agency is a has a negotiation with discursivity, right. So therein lies agency. So you cannot really look at agency as a postdiscursive phenomenon. Agency is a discursive phenomenon. Agency is within the discursive field and there is no outside of the text, right. So again a very (( )) (18:30) term there is no outside of the discursive field, right. So everything that happens, every action, every activity, every work is part of the discursive field in which we are embedded as human subjects, okay.

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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, 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

So the human condition comprehends more than the conditions under which life has been given to man, right. Men are conditioned beings because everything that they come in contact with turns immediately into a condition of their existence. So again this is a very interesting definition of intersubjectivity or this is a very phenomenal quality of human beings, the very phenomenal quality of human life which is also discursive.

So again the the very interesting entanglement of phenomenality and discursivity is something that Arendt does quite well. This is a really radical, this is one of the many radical things which

this particular book does. The very interesting mixture, the very interesting blend of phenomenality and discursivity the feeling human being and the discursive human being. So part of the same category altogether.

So everything turns immediately into a condition of their existence. So everything they come in contact with turn into something else. So it has a transformative quality, human activity or human action. The world in which the vita active spends itself consists of things produced by humans activities, by human activities, but the things that owe their existence exclusively to men nevertheless constantly condition their human makers. So it is a two way process, right.

So human beings create things and things make and reform and you know inform human beings as well. So this again is very interestingly related to what we now call in current critical theory as thing theory where the idea of things, so what makes things, things right. So and what makes things waste, right. So the idea of waste, idea of thing, the idea of commodity and the idea of waste these are very important ontological categories in which a lot of research has been done today.

But the point is what Arendt says over here is very interesting and she talks about a dialogic quality between things and human subjects. So how human subjects they make things, they produce objects which then become things with a used value, with a commodity value etc. But at the same time, the same commodity value, the same used value, the same thingness of the thing they inform and invested into the making of the human subject, in the complex making of the human subject. So it is a two-way process.

They also make each other as the thing makes the human, the human makes the thing again at a very phenomenal/discursive level, okay. 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 their human origin and their variability notwithstanding possess the same conditioning power as natural things, right.

So again the idea of unnatural things the idea of unnatural conditions is very very important over here as Arendt is arguing. So this idea of unnatural things which are just as important as natural things right. So again this is a very interesting, blurring of the borderline between natural and virtual. So she is not really hierarchizing anything. She is not saying that natural is more important than unnatural etc.

So she is actually saying that unnatural is just as equal as the natural. So the unnatural activity, the unnatural production, the unnatural thing is just as important for human condition as the natural environment in which they are housed. So whatever touches or enters into a sustained relationship with human life immediately assumes the character of a condition of human existence.

So again this is a very transformative quality of human existence in which it transforms everything that it comes in contact with into something, into something human in quality. So this idea of humanness becomes more of a distributive phenomenon rather than a hierarchical phenomenon. So everything that you come in contact with, everything that you navigate with, everything that you negotiate with becomes human by default and there is a human quality innately in that interaction, okay.

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. So the thingness and the human condition this supplement each other. So again Arendt and this is one of the reasons why some critiques look at Arendt as one of the first theorists of what we now call the post human condition or the post humanism as field of study which does away with any borderline, which does away with any gap, any epistemic gap or any ontological gap between the organic and the inorganic or the human and the nonhuman.

That is being done away with that blur that borderline is blurred completely and Arendt over here seems to anticipate that kind of a condition where she says quite clearly that the object or thing or thing character and the human subject they supplement each other in a very discursive as well

a phenomenal way and that mixture, that mixing that blend of discursivity and phenomenality through things in human subjects that is one of the conditions of the human condition right.

So human condition is marked by this blending of discursivity and phenomenality, right. So the idea of corporeality becomes quite complex in Arendt's thesis over here where the human body is not just the organic human body, the human body is also that what it navigates with. So the things that it navigates with, the objects that it navigates with becomes part of the embodiment process. Becomes part of the corporeal process.

So corporeality as a phenomenon is phenomenal of course, is part of the biological process, is part of the effective process. But at the same time there is a discursive artificial quality about corporeality which is equal important in Arendt's contention, okay. So 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.

So you know things have become, things become a very important component of human existence. We cannot really possibly conceive of human existence without thinking of things. And likewise things inform human existence and human existence inform things. So human beings create things, makes things, produce things at the same time they are produced by things as well. They are made by things as well, are remade or unmade by things as well, okay.

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same as human nature, and the sum total of human activities and capabilities which correspond to the human condition does not constitute anything like human nature. For neither those we discuss here nor those we leave out, like thought and reason, and not even the most meticulous enumeration of them all, constitute essential characteristics of human existence in the sense that without them this existence would no longer be human. The most radical change in the human condition we can imagine would be an emigration of men from the earth to some other planet. Such an event, no longer totally impossible, would imply that man would have to live under man-made conditions, radically different from those the earth offers him. Neither labor nor work nor action nor, indeed, thought as we know it would then make sense any longer. Yet even these hypothetical wanderers from the earth would still be human; but the only statement we could make regarding their "nature" is that they still are conditioned beings, even though their condition is now self-made to a considerable extent.

And now she gives a very interesting difference on page 9 and 10, the difference between human condition and human nature and she says these are not really similar things and she sort of dramatizes the dissimilarity between human condition and human nature thus. So she says just to make sure that the human condition is not the same as human nature, this is page 10 on your screen, should be highlighted in yellow where she says the sum total of human activities and capabilities which correspond to the human condition does not constitute anything like human nature.

For neither those we discuss here nor those we leave out like thought and reason and not even the most meticulous enumeration of them all constitute essential characteristics of human existence in the sense that without them this existence would no longer be human, right. So this is again a very important distinction that Arendt is making that human nature there is an inward quality about human nature which does not really require any external interaction, right.

But human condition is this constant interface of the inward and the outward, the constant dialogue between the inside and the outside and if we know the human condition without the outside apparatus whether a discursive, artificial apparatus that we navigate with. But human nature is the you know the human condition, that the human faculty, the human behavior, the human existence, the human inwardness etc., intellect, intelligence etc. which are not directly reliant on the outside apparatus in the sense the human condition is, right okay.

So this is what she says over here. For neither those we discuss here nor those we leave out like thought and reason, so thought and reason are considered to be you know generally considered to be some of the key things for human nature and not even the most meticulous enumeration of them all constitute essential characteristics of human existence in the sense that without them the existence would no longer be human.

The most radical change in the human condition we can imagine would be an emigration of men from the earth to some other planet. Such an event no longer totally impossible would imply that man would have to live under man-made conditions radically different from those the earth offers him. Neither labor nor work nor action indeed thought as we know it would then make sense any longer.

Yet even these hypothetical wanderers from the earth would still be human but the only statement we could make regarding their nature is that they still are conditioned beings even though their condition is now self-made to a considerable extent. So we are back again to the idea of the human conditions where human condition relies on the artificial apparatus outside.

Where the human nature is what you are as a human being and the human condition is the mixture of human nature and your interaction with the external environment and then she gives a very extreme example over here of suppose the hypothetical situation where men are transplanted from the earth and taken somewhere else and then what happens to the human condition over there?

So human condition changes over there but obviously the human condition you know was altered to a considerable extent but then the condition still remains in the sense that we still have to navigate with external surroundings, right. So the human nature and human condition are different in Arendt's thesis over here. The human nature is the intellect, the reason, the insideness of the human being and human condition is the mixture of this.



With the external apparatus which is created through work which is created through activity through action, action of course being the producer of plurality over here, okay. So we will stop here today. This is the first lecture on Hannah Arendt's *The Human Condition*. We are just beginning to sort of delineate and read the different categories that she lays out in the very beginning of the book before moving deeply into thesis which we will cover you know in the coming lectures and the lectures to come.

So I will see you, I will interact with you again in the next few lectures where we will continue with Hannah Arendt's *The Human Condition*. But this is the conclusion of the first lecture. Thank you for your attention.