

Piotr S. MAZUR

TWO CONCEPTIONS OF UNDERSTANDING HUMAN ACTION Hannah Arendt and Karol Wojtyła

For Arendt, action is “the one miracle-working faculty of man,” through which he initiates something new and enters the human world, while for Wojtyła, action is the ability to perform acts (agency). Arendt sees action as the individual’s readiness to manifest his individuality and uniqueness in the human world, while Wojtyła considers action as the manifestation of man’s personal status and dignity.

Hannah Arendt and Karol Wojtyła, twentieth-century philosophers interested in man and his practical activity, developed, independently, two different philosophical conceptions based on their different scholarly toolkits. They presented their respective reflections in *The Human Condition* (1958)¹ and *Person and Act* (1969),² the former being a classic work in political philosophy, while the latter a classic work in personalist ethics and anthropology. Both philosophers were well acquainted with the classical tradition and referred to it in their understanding of man and his dynamism. Arendt found the key to revealing the human condition in her analyses of the dynamisms of practical life (*vita activa*), such as labor, work, and action. Through his analyses of “man acts” (*actus humanus*)—as opposed to everything that “happens in man” (*actus hominis*)—Wojtyła sought to precisely describe the nature of the human person as an acting subject. There is no doubt that the two conceptions of action—worked out independently of each other, distinct, and in many respects antithetic—complement each other in their understanding of man and his actions.³

¹ See Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998). Paul Ricoeur observes that although *The Human Condition* is a classic of political science, it can also be categorized as a work representing the field of philosophical anthropology, if it is understood to “mean an inquiry aimed at identifying the most enduring features of the temporal condition of man—those which are the least vulnerable to the vicissitudes of the modern age.” Paul Ricoeur, “Action, Story and History: On Re-reading *The Human Condition*,” in “On Hannah Arendt,” special issue, *Salmagundi*, no. 60 (1983): 60. The analysis of Arendt’s concept proposed here will be limited to these anthropological aspects.

² See Karol Wojtyła, “*Person and Act*” and *Related Essays*, trans. Grzegorz Ignatik (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2021). See also Karol Wojtyła, *The Acting Person*, trans. Andrzej Potocki (Boston: D. Reidel, 1979); Karol Wojtyła, *Person and Community: Selected Essays*, trans. Theresa H. Sandok (New York: Peter Lang, 1993). In the present article, Grzegorz Ignatik’s translations of Wojtyła’s works will be the basis for the references.

³ There is no reference to Arendt’s work in Wojtyła’s study, which means that the two books were written independently of each other.

THE DYNAMISM OF ACTUS HUMANUS

Both Arendt and Wojtyła emphasize the fact that man's dynamism has different forms and manifestations, depending on its source, focus, and aim. In their works, both thinkers strive to characterize the activities that make up human dynamism and describe the interdependencies between them as comprehensively as possible⁴. Their distinct approaches to the intellectual grasp of such activities can be seen in that they define them by using different opposing concepts: practical activity (*vita activa*) versus theoretical activity (*vita contemplativa*) on the one hand (Arendt), and "man acts" (*actus humanus*) and "something happens in man" (*actus hominis*) on the other (Wojtyła). Both authors use these classical distinctions (albeit in different ways) to structure and develop their reflections.

According to Wojtyła, human dynamism as such is manifested in man's experiencing what happens both when "man acts"⁵ and when "something happens in man."⁶ Action is an expression of conscious and voluntary human activity, whereas what happens in man consists of a set of various dynamisms, among which Wojtyła distinguishes the somatic-vegetative dimension and the psycho-emotive dimension, as well as the drive for self-preservation, the sexual drive, and the reproductive one.⁷ Man is aware of his sundry dynamisms to varying degrees. The somatic-vegetative dynamism is manifested essentially outside consciousness, whereas the psycho-emotional one involves a participation of consciousness and is subordinate to it, although sometimes it can dominate consciousness. The dynamism of man's act is not possible without consciousness. Moreover, each form of the dynamism realizes in its own way the activity of the human being as the entire structure.⁸ Since they are activities of one and the same ontic subject, the dynamism of the fact "man acts" and the dynamism of the structure "something happens in man" oppose and complement each other. Referring to Aristotle, Wojtyła interprets the fact "man acts" as an active dynamism through which the subject manifests his self-determination, and interprets the structure "something happens in man" as a passive dynamism to which man is subjected.⁹ These dynamisms are not

⁴ See João J. Vila-Chã, "The Plurality of Action: Hannah Arendt and the Human Condition," *Revista Portuguesa de Filosofia* 50, no. 1/3 (1994): 477–84.

⁵ Karol Wojtyła, "Person and Act," in Wojtyła, *"Person and Act" and Related Essays*, 163.

⁶ *Ibidem*. See *ibidem* 163–64.

⁷ See *ibidem*, 324–29.

⁸ See *ibidem*, 164.

⁹ See Jerzy W. Galkowski, "The Place of Thomism in the Anthropology of K. Wojtyła," *Angelicum* 65, no. 2 (1988): 189–90.

separate from each other. According to Wojtyła, their reciprocal relationship can be grasped with the use of two fundamental categories, namely: transcendence and integration.¹⁰

In a human act, the transcendence of the person—in the sense of the person transcending his self—is manifested in two ways. Firstly, it is the person's intentional crossing his boundary toward an object in his various acts of cognition and volition (i.e., “horizontal transcendence”¹¹). Secondly, any act of choosing a specific value-end by the person (or, as Wojtyła calls it, the person's self-determination) demonstrates the person's freedom in his choice of the specific object of his cognition or volition. This freedom stems from the inner reference of human volition to truth, which ensures the person's control over his dynamism (i.e., “vertical transcendence”¹²). This is particularly evident in an act of conscience, in which the person, guided by the recognized truth about the good, stands above all his volition or action and, at the same time, gains control over them. According to Wojtyła, a human act is also an expression of the integration of the person, since it transforms the plurality and diversity of dynamisms inherent in his somatic and psychological life into a superior dynamic unity.¹³ “The human act is not only a simple summation of those dynamisms, but also a new and superior dynamism in which they acquire new content and new quality: the content and quality that is properly personal.”¹⁴ Thus, it is an act that links the dynamism of what happens in man with the dynamism of action and makes the entire human dynamism personal.

The person's transcendence and integration are complementary: they condition and justify each other. According to Wojtyła, transcendence is related to the active side of the dynamism of the person, which is manifested in his experiencing agency (“I am the agent”¹⁵). The components of the structure of this experience of self-determination are self-governance and self-possession, since an act can only be performed by someone who is capable of self-governance and self-possession.¹⁶ This active side of human activity corresponds to man's passive side because the subject's self-possession corresponds in him to what is possessed, and his self-governance corresponds to being governed. Undoubtedly, the conception of the thus-conceived dynamic unity of man,

¹⁰ The concepts of transcendence and integration as referred to the human person are analyzed in these considerations in relation to the theme of the dynamism of man.

¹¹ Wojtyła, “Person and Act,” 221.

¹² *Ibidem*, 241.

¹³ See *ibidem*, 304.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*, 168.

¹⁶ See *ibidem*, 295.

which is achieved through action, is of vital importance to Wojtyła's entire anthropology.¹⁷

THE DYNAMISM OF VITA ACTIVA

Hannah Arendt is interested in the dynamism of man's action, but she understands this dynamism more broadly than Wojtyła. Apart from action, she also analyzes labor and work, focusing on the characteristics and the interactions between them.¹⁸ In her opinion, work and labor belong among "the most elementary articulations of the human condition"¹⁹ and—because of their specificity and interdependence—it is them that make this condition dynamic and historical at the same time.

Each of the aspects of the dynamism of man has its own specificity and is a response to specific challenges posed by the human condition. Labor is a result of the biological conditions of human existence and, at the same time, a response to them. Labor serves the needs of the human body as a living organism. As such, labor is oriented towards human life in general and therefore it is marked by the fragility of human existence. Work, conceived as man's activity, goes beyond both his biological dimension and the cyclical process of sustaining the survival of the human species. Work results in a world of cultural artefacts which constitutes the space of life that is proper to man: this world differs from the things that exist in nature and, as such, manifests the "unnaturalness"²⁰ and "worldliness"²¹ of human existence. The most important among the practical activities analyzed by Arendt is action, which is a response to human existence being ingrained between birth and death. Action occurs directly between people and finds expression in the public sphere, in particular in

¹⁷ See G a ł k o w s k i, "The Place of Thomism in the Anthropology of K. Wojtyła": 189.

¹⁸ Wojtyła was also interested in the issues of labor and art and he reflected on them more extensively—albeit only to a limited extent from a philosophical perspective—as Pope John Paul II in his Encyclical Letter *Laborem Exercens* of 1981 and in his Letter to Artists of 1999. See J o h n P a u l I I, Encyclical Letter *Laborem Exercens*, The Holy See, https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_14091981_laborem-exercens.html; "Letter of His Holiness Pope John Paul II to Artists," The Holy See, https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/letters/1999/documents/hf_jp-ii_let_23041999_artists.html.

¹⁹ A r e n d t, *The Human Condition*, 5. As Roy T. Tsao explains, Arendt's point is that "labor, work, and action derive from what she takes to be the fundamental (and numerically finite) ways in which we are able to comprehend the basic kinds of continuity and change that human beings are able to effect through their own activity." Roy T. T s a o, "Arendt against Athens: Rereading *The Human Condition*," *Political Theory* 30, no. 1 (2002): 102.

²⁰ A r e n d t, *The Human Condition*, 7.

²¹ *Ibidem*.

politics.²² Relationships which are specific for action are intermediated neither by things nor by matter, which distinguishes them from those characteristic of work. “Action” denotes a unique way in which individuals initiate something new, enter the human world, and manifest their freedom. The relationality inherent in action makes human existence manifest and actualize itself in the world in a network of interactions with other people. Because of this, the human condition is marked by plurality both quantitatively (the concrete human being exists among other human subjects) and qualitatively (these subjects exist in singular and unique a way). “We are all the same, that is, human, in such a way that nobody is ever the same as anyone else who has ever lived, lives or will live,”²³ writes Arendt. As Tsao observes, for an activity to be considered action, it must meet the most important and necessary condition: when it enters the network of social relations as a new event, story, or narrative, it must express the readiness of the person who acts to reveal who he is and what he is doing or intends to do. Otherwise, it is not possible to treat such activity as action. At the same time, other subjects involved in action must be willing and able to recognize an activity as action.²⁴

According to Arendt, in addition to its social character, human action as a process is characterized by unpredictability and irreversibility. The unpredictability of action does not mean that it is impossible to predict all logical consequences of activities undertaken by man but that it is impossible to capture the meaning of action before it is completed. Unlike work, whose results can be assessed as it progresses by referring to a given model, the meaning of action is more apparent to those who describe it than to those who participate in it.²⁵ The German philosopher links the irreversibility of action to “being unable to undo what one has done.”²⁶ As Conovan observes, the social nature, unpredictability, and irreversibility of action make it impossible for anyone to ever be in control of the events of his life.²⁷ Because of the unpredictability and irreversibility of action, which for Arendt, as for Wojtyła, is a manifestation of human freedom, a paradox arises: “Nowhere ... neither in labor, subject to the necessity of life,

²² Margaret Conovan points to Arendt’s distinction between the “‘world’ of civilisation” and the “public realm” of which the former is merely a part. Margaret Conovan, *Hannah Arendt: A Reinterpretation of Her Political Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 111. “The public realm is a place of discourse and action,” writes Conovan. *Ibidem*. It is there that human beings exercise their freedom and can act spontaneously. See *ibidem*.

²³ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 8.

²⁴ See Tsao, “Arendt against Athens: Rereading *The Human Condition*”: 104–5. See also Mark Buttón, “Arendt, Rawls, and Public Reason,” in “Religion and Politics,” special issue, *Social Theory and Practice* 31, no. 2 (2005): 265.

²⁵ See Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 192.

²⁶ *Ibidem*, 237.

²⁷ See Conovan, *Hannah Arendt: A Reinterpretation of Her Political Thought*, 132.

nor in fabrication, dependent upon given material, does man appear to be less free than in those capacities whose very essence is freedom and in that realm which owes its existence to nobody and nothing but man.”²⁸

Arendt and Wojtyła share the conviction that human action is a way of manifesting who the subject that emanates it is and, at the same time, a way of the subject’s communication with other people and the world. For Arendt, action is “the one miracle-working faculty of man,” through which he initiates something new and enters the human world, while for Wojtyła, action is the ability to perform acts (agency). Arendt sees action as the individual’s readiness to manifest his individuality and uniqueness in the human world, while Wojtyła considers action as the manifestation of man’s personal status and dignity. They both see not only the positive aspects of action, but also the challenges that accompany it. According to Wojtyła, action requires man to integrate what happens in him into his personal life and to respect the axiological order in his acts. According to Arendt in turn, action requires coping with the irreversibility and unpredictability of its results. Both Arendt and Wojtyła are also aware of the paradoxes occurring in human action. Wojtyła holds that although human freedom is manifested through action, self-determination as the fulfilment of freedom consists in auto-determination. Arendt, on the other hand, points out that the unpredictability and irreversibility of action makes it more limited than work or labor.

Thus Arendt and Wojtyła direct their analyses of the human dynamism towards its two complementary aspects in an attempt to grasp, on the one hand, the permanent elements that constitute its foundation and, on the other, the dynamic and changeable elements that are its consequence. One might say that, as a result, an analysis of the dynamism of action from the individual perspective is complemented by an analysis of the same dynamism from the social or public perspective, and the quest to better understand the nature of the human subject corresponds to the quest to reveal his condition.

POLITICS BEFORE ETHICS

In their respective conceptions, Arendt and Wojtyła take into consideration various aspects of human action falling within Aristotle’s *praxis*, in which he included ethics, economics, and politics. According to Aristotle, ethics is part of broadly understood politics as a realm of human affairs.²⁹ However,

²⁸ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 234.

²⁹ See Aristotle, *The Great Ethics*, 1181a, in *The Great Ethics of Aristotle*, trans. Peter L. P. Simpson, (London and New York: Routledge, 2014), 5–6.

proper participation in political life requires having moral skills and respect for moral principles, which does not allow politics to be detached from ethics. In their works, neither Arendt nor, still less, Wojtyła breaks with the unity of human *praxis* understood in such a way, although they are interested in its various aspects and are aware of the distinctness of these aspects. Like Aristotle, Arendt considers ethics and economics (also in Karl Marx's understanding) as a sphere of private activity, while politics as the domain of public action,³⁰ and it is precisely the public sphere and politics that become the fundamental focus of her cognitive analyses of the human condition. Wojtyła studies action from the ethical perspective; he does not contrast activity in the private and public spheres or the public and social spheres as sharply as Arendt does but rather sees in social relations an extension and expansion of the personal agency of a concrete man.

What is apparent in Arendt's conception is her linking political action with the human condition as such. The omission of activities in the private sphere is the result of her conscious intention to characterize the human condition and not the condition of a particular concrete man or the condition of a particular group of people. She consistently excludes individual issues from her analyses and takes into account the conditions of action shared by all human subjects, both those that are immutable (ontological or biological) and those that are changeable and appear and disappear at a given time (technical-civilizational or cultural-social). In her opinion, such an approach to the human condition in a universalized and objectivized form can be provided only by analyses of actions of individual subjects which take place in the public sphere.

Although reflections on the moral character of action occupy a marginal place in *The Human Condition*, morality, according to Arendt, plays an irreducible role in the case of political action.³¹ She argues that morality is not limited to the sum total of the habits and customs of human behavior. However, the claim that political activity should be linked to morality differs from justifying the validity of certain principles or laws in the public sphere. In Arendt's opinion, in politics, the only source of this validity is the good will

³⁰ See R i c o e u r, "Action, Story and History: On Re-reading *The Human Condition*": 66.

³¹ In *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Arendt points to the presence of radical or "absolute" evil that emerges in the last stages of totalitarianism and that is not limited to the enslavement of individuals from without but also interferes in their inner world and destroys human spontaneity and social and political activity. See Hannah A r e n d t, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harvest Book, 1979), viii and 245. In her *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, she in turn scrutinizes the case of German criminal Adolf Eichmann and his trial, focusing on the "banality" or even ridiculousness of evil caused by Eichmann's thoughtlessness and career drive, which predestined him to become one of the most heinous Nazi criminals. See Hannah A r e n d t, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (New York: Penguin Classics, 2006), 287–88. See also C o n o v a n, *Hannah Arendt: A Reinterpretation of Her Political Thought*, 158–64.

of acting subjects which results from their understanding of the specificity of man's action, which is subject to two fundamental flaws: irreversibility and unpredictability.³² The response to the irreversibility of action is the willingness to forgive and be forgiven, while the response to its unpredictability is the willingness to make and keep promises. According to Arendt, rules are ingrained in action and do not come from the outside of action itself, i.e., from some other faculty or from some other experience than action itself.³³ Their source is the "will to live together with others in the mode of acting and speaking."³⁴ Rather than being founded on external deontology, these precepts are founded on pragmatism which stems from the awareness that human action is associated with considerable risk and is thus imperfect. The postulative nature of these precepts does not mean that they are not necessary. Arendt justifies the need to respect them in political action on the grounds that they condition the continuity and permanence of human relations. "The two faculties belong together in so far as one of them, forgiving, serves to undo the deeds of the past, whose 'sins' hang like Damocles' sword over every new generation; and the other, binding oneself through promises, serves to set up in the ocean of uncertainty, which the future is by definition, islands of security without which not even continuity, let alone durability of any kind, would be possible in the relationships between men."³⁵

Arendt contrasts willingness to forgive and to make promises with the traditional approach to assessing political actions from the perspective of the relationship between the means and the ends of action. In her opinion, the practice of political action reveals that all means that lead to the achievement of a chosen end are considered both permissible and justifiable. Restrictions on the use of these means always stem from a previously adopted moral system, and it is by no means certain that such a system will be adopted at all. Moreover, the very restriction of the means for the sake of the end leads to a paradox which stems from "the definition of an end being precisely the justification of the means."³⁶ Therefore, she states quite sharply that "as long as we believe that we deal with ends and means in the political realm, we shall not be able to prevent anybody's using all means to pursue recognized ends."³⁷ Her critique of the approach to assessing political action from the perspective of the fairness of the means used does not invalidate the question of the presence of moral

³² In Arendt's concept of good will, the peculiar autonomy of action, and the postulative nature of rules can be viewed as a clear reference to Kant's ethics.

³³ See Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 246.

³⁴ See *ibidem*.

³⁵ *Ibidem*, 237.

³⁶ *Ibidem*, 229.

³⁷ *Ibidem*.

rules in action. The rejection of moral rules in political action motivated by pragmatic considerations does not undermine the significance of those rules, just as killing does not undermine the moral significance of the prohibition of killing. It shows the state of morality in the public sphere and the limited impact on human action of any moral precepts, including those that come from within action itself, which ultimately depend on good will to obey them.

ETHICS BEFORE POLITICS

As a personalist, Wojtyła focuses his reflections on the person, seeing in action a manifestation of the permanence and continuity of human nature. Action (an act) is an expression of this permanence and continuity; an act manifests not only freedom, but also the moral responsibility of man as its subject-agent. Due to this agency, a concrete act not only entails certain consequences, but is also subject to moral evaluation, since it is subordinated to the good of the person as the subject and goal of action. Morality—and, through it, ethics—is necessarily inscribed in the specificity of every human action which takes the form of an act, whether it occurs in the individual or in the social sphere. Wojtyła grounds his analyses in everything that morally and pragmatically conditions the action of an individual subject. This also applies to the understanding and moral or ethical evaluation of actions in the public—social or strictly political—sphere. Consequently, political action is subject to the same moral norms as action in the private sphere.

In “Person and Act,” Wojtyła does not devote much space to analyses of ethical issues in the area of social action. This is because he does not intend to enumerate or examine in detail all principles that define the conditions for morally right action in the public sphere. His main concern is to show from the metaphysical and phenomenological perspectives that every act—because of who performs it (the personal subject) and why he fulfils it (the good of the person)—is the key to understanding the dynamic nature of the person. Thus, as Tadeusz Ślipko notes, Wojtyła takes the “data of the moral experience”³⁸ as the starting point of his conception and recognizes that “our intellectual apprehension of the person in and through his actions are derived in a particular way from the fact that actions have a moral value: they are good or bad.”³⁹ As a result, Wojtyła focuses so much on explaining the dynamic aspect of moral values (the dynamic *feri*) that he even does not specify which moral

³⁸ Tadeusz Ślipko, “The Concept of Value in the Ethical Thought of Cardinal Karol Wojtyła,” *Forum Philosophicum* 1 (2006): 11.

³⁹ *Ibidem*.

values he has in mind.⁴⁰ This reveals that although his analyses refer to moral experience, at the same time, from the point of view of ethics, they are rather selective. The same also applies to his approach to the relationship between ethics and politics.

Wojtyła has no doubt that within social and political action it is necessary to provide such conditions that will allow the person to be an authentic agent of his actions, both from the subjective side (an agent himself) and from the objective one (the way in which social relations are arranged). According to Edward Barrett, Wojtyła derives this conviction from a more general anthropological fact: “We are social beings not only in the senses that we are affected by our human environment or need the contributions of others to secure the goods necessary to (using Aristotle’s typology) mere life and the good life. Human sociality includes these aspects but is most deeply understood as our vocation to love—to will the good of the other.”⁴¹ With this in mind, Wojtyła approaches the aforementioned problem of participation and alienation as two extreme modes of participation of the person in social action.⁴²

Following Aristotle, both Arendt and Wojtyła differentiate between the ethical and the political aspects of action, so in their analyses they basically restrict themselves to one or the other. However, this does not mean that, for Arendt, moral issues are less important than political ones; nor does it mean that Wojtyła, while focusing on morality, neglects the role played by politics and social issues. A comparison of Arendt’s and Wojtyła’s conceptions demonstrates that ethics neither replaces nor undermines the importance of political actions and, similarly, politics does not replace ethics. These are two complementary and, at the same time, interpenetrating aspects of man’s practical life within his *vita activa*. Hence, these concepts do not justify separating the public sphere and politics from morality.

It is worth mentioning that Arendt and Wojtyła came from the generation and the countries which were drastically affected by the Second World War and genocide. Despite these tragic experiences, Wojtyła’s approach strongly resonates with a belief in the validity of moral principles in the public sphere, which are viable coefficients of action. Hence, it is evident in his works that he seeks to consolidate these principles in the social and political spheres. The fundamental principle is to ensure that every person is endowed with

⁴⁰ See *ibidem*.

⁴¹ Edward Barrett, *Persons and Liberal Democracy: The Ethical and Political Thought of Karol Wojtyła/Pope John Paul II* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2010), 26–27.

⁴² On participation and alienation, see Alma S. Espartinez, “Karol Wojtyła on Participation and Alienation,” *Studia Gilsoniana* 12, no. 1 (2023): 33–59; Dean Edward A. Mejos, “Against Alienation: Karol Wojtyła’s Theory of Participation,” *Kritikē* 1, no. 1 (2007): 71–85, *Kritike: An Online Journal of Philosophy*, http://www.kritike.org/journal/issue_1/mejos_june2007.pdf.

subjective agency and self-determination in social activity, through which his personal dignity is expressed. From the experience of her generation, Arendt draws the conclusion that traditional approaches to the moral assessment of action in the public sphere have failed. In her opinion, moral principles have little impact on the goals, motives, and *modus operandi* in politics, hence she looks for these principles in action itself and appeals to man's will to adhere to them for pragmatic reasons. Arendt and Wojtyła thus agree that moral rules for action and assessments of action can come from both without action itself (for instance, from an understanding of who the acting subject is) and from within action itself (for instance from an understanding of what conditions cooperation between different subjects). However, the two philosophers differ in their assessment of the universality of these principles and have different opinions on the possibility of justifying their validity in public life and on, most importantly, their enforceability.

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Two different—though in many places complementary—views on man and his action meet in Arendt's and Wojtyła's conceptions. The common point of reference for their analyses is the classical tradition with its Aristotelian distinction between the theoretical and practical spheres. The practical sphere is further divided into action directed towards products (art) and towards man (politics), the latter being divided into moral, economic, and political action. Wojtyła complements this division of human activities with a scholastic distinction between *actus humanus* and *actus hominis*, whereby it is clear that politics as a public domain is an expression of "man acts" rather than of "what happens in and with man." Arendt and Wojtyła know perfectly well what aspect of human activity they are analyzing and why. In their analyses of man and his action, they also share the desire to synthesize the classical philosophical tradition, whose roots lie in ancient Greece, with contemporary thought.

In his studies, Wojtyła focuses primarily on analyses of individual acts that reveal the nature of man as their agent, although he also takes social aspects into account. Arendt recognizes the importance of individual actions and assumes the subjective agency of man in action, since it is only individual subjects who act rather than the generically understood man or mankind. However, she is primarily interested in the public domain and in the political aspect of action, which significantly affects the shape of social life and the human condition. According to Wojtyła, all human action—as the action of a being who is guided by reason and free will—is moral action. Regardless of whether it takes place in the individual, social, or political spheres, it is a way of realizing the good

and is subject to moral law. According to Arendt, the action of a concrete man, as an activity distinct from work, is directed towards other people. As such, it occurs in relationships with other individuals and is conditioned by this fact. Therefore, also morality—as it involves action of the individual towards another individual—takes on a public form, and it contains a seed of political action, even though it belongs to the private domain.

A juxtaposition of Arendt's and Wojtyła's conceptions reveals their differences, as well as complementarity in their understanding of the various aspects of human action: ethical and political; ontic and socio-cultural; permanent (which manifests nature) and changeable (which manifests condition); conditioned subjectively and conditioned objectively; analyzed from the perspective of the source and from the perspective of conditions and effects. However, such an approach may give rise to an erroneous opinion that these conceptions are themselves rather one-sided. Thus, it should be emphasized that their complementarity does not stem from some fundamental lack but is a consequence of their authors' deliberate choice of the main aspect of their considerations, on which they elaborate in their other works. Arendt's *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, *On Violence*,⁴³ and also *The Life of the Mind*,⁴⁴ which deals with *vita contemplativa*, can be regarded as complementary to her reflections presented in *The Human Condition*. Obvious complements to "Person and Act" are Wojtyła's essays that accompany it, including "The Personal Structure of Self-Determination,"⁴⁵ "The Person: Subject and Community,"⁴⁶ "Participation or Alienation,"⁴⁷ and "Theoria and Praxis in the Philosophy of the Human Person."⁴⁸ The subject matter of these and other works by Arendt and Wojtyła reveals that there is sufficient basis for a much broader or more detailed comparison of their views. The far-reaching parallelism of Arendt's and Wojtyła's views invites not only their comparison but also an attempt to synthesize them.

The comparison of Arendt's and Wojtyła's views presented here does not cover their diagnoses of the state of culture and the state of civilization, which together characterize the human condition in the past as well as in the times the two philosophers witnessed. It also does not cover their diagnoses of the

⁴³ See Hannah Arendt, *On Violence* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1970).

⁴⁴ See Hannah Arendt, *The Life of the Mind* (San Diego: Harcourt, 1981).

⁴⁵ See Karol Wojtyła, "The Personal Structure of Self-Determination: A Lecture for the Conference on St. Thomas," in Karol Wojtyła, *"Person and Act" and Related Essays*, 457–66.

⁴⁶ See Karol Wojtyła, "The Person: Subject and Community," in Karol Wojtyła, *"Person and Act" and Related Essays*, 467–513.

⁴⁷ See Karol Wojtyła, "Participation or Alienation," in Karol Wojtyła, *"Person and Act" and Related Essays*, 514–31.

⁴⁸ See Karol Wojtyła, "Theoria and Praxis in the Philosophy of the Human Person," in Karol Wojtyła, *"Person and Act" and Related Essays*, 567–74.

state of social life, politics, and culture, or their assessment of history and the processes that take place in it. Neither does it fully describe their understanding of politics or their assessment of political, social, and cultural processes. However, including these issues in the analyses would be difficult because, firstly, Arendt died over thirty years earlier than Wojtyła, who witnessed and participated in previously unforeseeable socio-political events, such as his election to pope and the fall of communism, and, secondly, because the nature of his works changed. As head of the Catholic Church, he addressed cultural, social, political, and economic phenomena primarily from the perspective of a theologian who shaped the entire doctrine of a religious institution. At the same time, as a religious leader, he initiated certain actions and processes that had a far greater impact on social and political life than would have been the case had he been an “ordinary” man.

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ABSTRACT / ABSTRAKT

Piotr S. MAZUR, Two Conceptions of Understanding Human Action: Hannah Arendt and Karol Wojtyła

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Hannah Arendt and Karol Wojtyła were two prominent philosophers of the twentieth century who sought to comprehend man by analyzing his action. Both philosophers referred to the classical tradition, but they focused on different aspects of the dynamism of human action. Arendt, by analyzing action as a practical activity aimed directly at another human being, showed the dynamic dimension of human existence. Wojtyła, through his analyses of an act, attempted to understand the nature of the human person as the subject of action. The article demonstrates that these two different and, in many respects, oppositional conceptions of human action in many places complement each other. The oppositions and complementarity of the two concepts can be seen in Arendt’s and Wojtyła’s approaches to the issues of *vita activa* and *actus humanus*, as well as ethics and politics.

Keywords: Hannah Arendt, Karol Wojtyła, human action, ethics and politics, *vita activa, actus humanus*

Contact: Department of the Philosophy of Being, Man and Society, Institute of Philosophy, Faculty of Philosophy, Ignatianum University in Cracow, ul. Kopernika 26, 31-501 Cracow, Poland

E-mail: piotr.mazur@ignatianum.edu.pl

Phone: +48 12 3999520

<https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Piotr-Mazur-9>

ORCID 0000-0002-6399-8133

Piotr S. MAZUR, Dwie koncepcje ludzkiego działania: Hannah Arendt i Karol Wojtyła

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Hannah Arendt i Karol Wojtyła to dwoje ważnych filozofów dwudziestego wieku, którzy dążyli do poznania człowieka poprzez analizę jego działania. Choć oboje odwoływali się do dziedzictwa tradycji klasycznej, to biorąc pod uwagę różne aspekty dynamizmu działania, doszli do odmiennych koncepcji antropologicznych. Arendt, analizując działanie jako aktywność praktyczną skierowaną bezpośrednio na drugiego człowieka, ukazała dynamiczny wymiar ludzkiego istnienia, jakim jest kondycja ludzka. Wojtyła poprzez analizę czynu chciał wniknąć w naturę osoby ludzkiej jako podmiotu działania. Artykuł wykazuje, że te dwie odmiennie i przeciwstawne koncepcje podejścia do ludzkiego działania w wielu miejscach wzajemnie się dopełniają. Opozycje między omawianymi koncepcjami oraz ich wzajemnie dopełnianie się widoczne są w rozumieniu przez Arendt i Wojtyłę działania, w ich postrzeganiu natury i kondycji człowieka, a także w ujęciu przez filozofów podmiotu działania i etycznego oraz politycznego wymiaru ludzkiej aktywności.

Słowa kluczowe: Hannah Arendt, Karol Wojtyła, działanie ludzkie, etyka i polityka, *vita activa, actus humanus*

Kontakt: Katedra Filozofii Bytu, Człowieka i Społeczeństwa, Instytut Filozofii, Wydział Filozofii, Uniwersytet Ignatianum w Krakowie, ul. Kopernika 26, 31-501 Kraków

E-mail: piotr.mazur@ignatianum.edu.pl

Tel. 12 3999520

<https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Piotr-Mazur-9>

ORCID 0000-0002-6399-8133