

**Hannah Arendt Center Dialogue Project:
Arendt's Conception of Experience
with Vigdis Kvam**

“What is the subject of our thought? Experience! Nothing else!”

From “Hannah Arendt on Hannah Arendt” in *Thinking Without a Bannister*

From Vigdis:

Arendt continues this utterance by saying “And if we lose the ground of experience then we get into all kinds of theories.” Arendt’s conception of experience is a topic where virtually all of her texts could have been chosen. I have tried to find texts that are relevant to the world we live in today. I have also chosen to stick to Arendt’s own texts and talks, and to one interpreter of her texts who has just focused on why Arendt is relevant for our time, namely Ari - Elmeri Hyvönen. My hope is that these texts will open many good discussions about Arendt's relevance to better understand the times we live in today. I’m convinced that in the quest to understand what is going on in the world today we find many pearls in Arendt’s texts.

That all thinking starts with experience seems obvious. But on closer reflection, several questions arise related to how we experience what is going on in the world today. We all carry our biases with us in how we perceive what is happening around us. What prejudices characterize our perceptions? Do established thought patterns determine what we see and what we don't see? Do emotions such as fear, hope, faith in the future etc. influence our experiences?

I: How to understand Arendt’s conception of Experience

“I want to understand. And if others understand – in the same sense that I have understood – that gives me a sense of satisfaction, like feeling at home.”

“What Remains? The Language Remains” – A Conversation with Günter Gaus

Question round: Participants will each name a lost treasure that they want to preserve for future generations.

Small Group Dialogue

Participants engage in dialogue about the readings in light of Arendt’s urge to understand, her use of imagination, and her view of human plurality and the ability to begin something new.

Whole Group Discussion of the Readings:

Arendt, Hannah. “Preface: The Gap Between Past and Future” pp. 3-15 in *Between Past and Future*, Penguin Books 1977.

Hyvönen, Ari-Elmeri. “Tentative Lessons of Experience: Arendt, Essayism, and “The Social” Reconsidered” in *Political Theory* 2014, Vol 42 (5) p. 269-289.

II: To understand what we are experiencing

“Only where things can be seen by many in a variety of aspects without changing their identity, so that those who are gathered around them know they see sameness in utter diversity, can worldly reality truly and reliably appear.” *The Human Condition*

Question round: Participants will each give an example of how overcoming a prejudice allowed them to have an experience they otherwise might not have had.

Small Group Dialogue

Participants engage in dialogue about the readings, relating them to the situation(s) we live in today--especially concepts like prejudice, truth, lies, image making and common sense.

Whole Group Discussion of the Readings:

Arendt, Hannah. “Introduction into Politics”; “What Is Politics?”; “Prejudice Against Politics And What in Fact, Politics Is Today”; and “Prejudice and Judgement”) in *The Promise of Politics* pp. 93–108, Schocken Books 2005.

Arendt, Hannah. Chapter 7 “Truth and Politics” in *Between Past and Future*, Penguin Books ((2006), p. 223-259.

III: World and Earth Alienation

“The earth is the very quintessence of the human condition, and earthly nature, for all we know, may be unique in the universe in providing human beings with a habitat in which they can move and breathe without effort and without artifice.”

From “Prologue” in *The Human Condition*

Question round: Participants will each comment on the question: What is your greatest fear for the world and the planet?

Small Group Dialogue

Participants engage in dialogue about the readings from the vantage point of our most recent fears and hopes, paying special attention to the role of growth and processes. How is your view related to Ari-Elmeri Hyvönen’s analyses?

Whole Group Discussion of the Readings:

Arendt, Hannah. “Prologue”pp. 1-6 and “World Alienation” pp, 248-256 in *The Human Condition*, The University of Chicago Press 2018.

Hyvönen, Ari-Elmeri. “Labor as Action: the Human Condition in the Anthropocene”, in *Research in Phenomenology* 50 (2020), p. 240-260.

IV: The role of appearances

“...whatever can see wants to be seen, whatever can hear calls out to be heard, whatever can touch presents itself to be touched.” *Life of the Mind* p. 29

Question round: Participants will each give an example of an opinion they held that was dispelled by new facts or more information.

Small Group Dialogue

Participants engage in dialogue about the readings as we think of appearances and the role it plays in our current notion of endless growth (key words could be: advertising, consumerism, and organization of jobs.)

Whole Group Discussion of the Readings:

Arendt, Hannah, Chapter I Part I Sections 1-5 “Appearances” pp.19-40.in *The Life of the Mind*, Harcourt Brace & Company, 1971,

Hyvönen, Ari-Elmeri “The Value of the Surface – Reappreciating Embodiment, Labor and Necessity in Arendt’s Political Thought,” *Critical Times* 4:2, August 2021, pp. 263-283.

V: To make up our mind over and over again.

“I would like to say that everything I did and everything I wrote – all that is tentative.”

From “Hannah Arendt on Hannah Arendt in *Thinking Without a Bannister*

Question round: What in Arendt’s answers and comments in “Hannah Arendt on Hannah Arendt” stood out to you?

Small Group Dialogue

Participants engage in dialogue about the readings commenting on the question: Have the sessions on the topic “Arendt’s conception of experience contributed in any way to your understanding of the world we live in today? If yes, can you say a few words about how? Suggestions for further readings, thoughts related to topics that haven’t been talked about so far are also very welcome here.

Whole Group Discussion of the Readings:

“What remains? The language remains” A conversation with Günter Gaus <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dVSRJC4KAiE> also printed in *Hannah Arendt - The Last Interview and other Conversations*, Melville House Publishing, 2013.

Arendt, Hannah. “Hannah Arendt on Hannah Arendt” in *Thinking Without a Bannister*, Schocken Books, New York 2018.

Vigdis Kvam: I have a cand.mag. in philosophy, history and social anthropology and a cand.philol. degree in philosophy taken back in the 1990-ties. Since then I have been working in administration at the Department of Philosophy, University in Bergen, first as a student advisor and later years managing webpages and working with dissemination. Before becoming a student, I had a lot of different work for instance as gardener (mostly summer time), shop employee, cleaner, lab assistant and a couple of others as well.

To say something about my main concerns in the world we live in I end my biography with two quotes from the conversation between Patrick J. Deneen, Francis Fukuyama, Deirdre Nansen McCloskey and Cornel West about the theme "[Is Liberalism Worth Saving?](#)", printed in Harpers's Magazine.

ON ECONOMIC GROWTH:

MCCLOSKEY: I'll make you a bet. By the year 2100, income per head worldwide will be two or three times higher than what it is now in the United States.

WEST: But the one thing that our dear sister is presupposing is that there's still a planet.

MCCLOSKEY: That's true. We're still able to shoot ourselves in the foot.

ON LIBERALISM VS NEOLIBERALISM:

FUKUYAMA: There's that famous Milton Friedman article about how the duty of any corporation is basically to its shareholders, maximizing profits—there's a purely economic argument that you can make in favor of that. But I don't think we appreciate the degree to which that view took hold in business schools and then started to erode precisely the kind of virtues that players in capitalist markets previously held, that they actually do have social responsibilities—to workers, to customers, to suppliers. Basically, they were told, "Just maximize your profits. Do what Wall Street wants you to do, and that's all you need to do. You don't have to worry about society as a whole."