



‘Please remain seated...’
Reflections on Hannah Arendt’s
metaphor of ‘the table of the world’

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Introduction

- **Á**rendt or Ar**é**ndt, that is the question...
- From the invitation: 'staying at the table: to keep engaging with others even if their ideas are radically different from one's own'
- What if the table has only two legs? Or when some people are deliberately trying to destroy the table?
- The possibilities and limitations of plurality – is plurality limited to the human species...?



Tables



And a very special 'table'



The politics of existence

- Hannah Arendt's idealist reanimation of Greek antiquity: *The Human Condition*
- *The Human Condition* (1958) and what it says about humans as political beings
- 'Lying in Politics' (1971) and 'Home to Roost' (1975): the Republic at the abyss
- Arendt's care for the world
- Arendt's use of language(s)

Arendt's use of metaphor

- Why should a philosopher / political thinker use metaphor?
- Some examples:
 - 'Mr Cohen' from 'We Refugees' (1943)
 - *Heart of Darkness* by Joseph Conrad (1902) in *Origins* (1951)
- Arendt's poems

‘The table of the world’

- A closer look at ‘world’... Three meanings:
 - The place where things happen
 - The world we build by making (homo faber)
 - The world we communicate about (acting, politics, meaning)
- The common world
- ‘To live together in the world means essentially that a world of things is between those who have it in common, as a **table** is located between those who sit around it; the world, like every in-between, relates and separates men at the same time.’

How 'the table' functions

- Plurality
- Unicity or natality
- Language, communication, deliberation, 'transaction'
- Kant's *Kritik der Urteilskraft*, in Arendt's reworking: *judging* made possible by the table
- 'Ich will verstehen' – and its translation
- 'Ver-stehen' at the table

Limitations

- Is everyone invited? (**spoiler alert**: no)
- ‘Stretching’ the metaphor!? What if we included every *body*? Animals and plants are bodies, rivers and oceans are bodies, micro-organisms are bodies...
- *A refusal* to sit around the table: ‘Don’t give oxygen to a party that’s lying’

‘Please remain seated’, or walking away?

- The tragic case of a broken friendship: Gershom Scholem
- The almost break-up of 1945
- The clash of 1963
- And the rest is silence....



Politics as sitting around a table: too cosy?

- Is the table of the world a comfort-zone, a safe space or ...
- Is it a contested space? Or a conflict-free zone?
- 'Acting in concert'? Or free jazz?
- Conflict as peaceful fighting
- (In)tolerance of intolerance

Conclusion and food for thought and exchange

- Arendt's table-metaphor is still very powerful, but we have to talk about issues such as: who is sitting at the table and is the 'who' restricted to homo sapiens?
- The table demands a coalition of positive intention ('the willing'), but has problems with those with negative intentions or who, in fact, are not interested to sit at the table at all
- Is action still possible? By a few privileged people? Artists perhaps?

Further reading

- Arendt, H., *The Human Condition* (multiple editions)
- Berding, J., Five books in Dutch on Arendt: <https://joopberding.com/wp-content/uploads/2025/09/vijf-boeken-van-joop-berding-over-hannah-arendt.pdf>
- Pols, W. & J. Berding (2018). “This is our world.” Hannah Arendt on education. In P. Smeyers (Ed.). *International Handbook of Philosophy of Education* (pp. 39-48). Cham, Switzerland: Springer.
- Berding, J. (2017). Devastating irony. Hannah Arendt and Harry Mulisch on the Eichmann Trial. In Cohen de Lara, E. & Drop, H. (Eds.). *Back tot he Core. Rethinking the Core Texts in Liberal Arts & Sciences Education in Europe* (pp. 335-348). Wilmington, DE: Vernon Press.
- www.joopberding.com/Arendt / www.joopberding.com/english-page

Further audio/video (in Dutch)

- Hannah Arendt Lezing 2025: Liefde, vriendschap en de wereld:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nr6nhz8wM_I
- Can beauty be an education ideal? <https://tjipcast.nl/filosofie/kan-schoonheid-een-onderwijsideaal-zijn/>
- On 'We Refugees':
<https://open.spotify.com/episode/3eFGiK51mAN9IpooVC9OTs?si=d3f99453c95f4734>
- **In English:** How I work with Hannah Arendt:
<https://sites.google.com/view/hannah-arendt-network/lectures/berding>