

# **LUDWIG VON MISES AND HANNAH ARENDT ON HUMAN ACTION**

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Few intellectuals have placed more emphasis on the concept of human action than the Austrian-born economist Ludwig von Mises and the German-born political philosopher Hannah Arendt. Indeed, Ludwig von Mises's entire elaboration of economic science is imputable to his singular conception of human action. Similarly, Hannah Arendt's entire political philosophy rests upon her own unique conception of human action. This shared emphasis on the concept of human action by Mises and Arendt is *not*, however, due to a shared conception of human action itself. In fact, while Mises's conception of human action is similar in some respects to that of Arendt, it also differs radically in many other important respects from that of Arendt. In this article, I will examine some of the similarities and differences between Ludwig von Mises's and Hannah Arendt's respective conceptions of human action. Special attention will be paid to their disparate epistemological positions, which, I will argue, are ultimately responsible for their dissimilar conceptions of human action. I will conclude with a discussion of some reasons that Ludwig von Mises's conception of human action highlights some severe deficiencies in Hannah Arendt's conception of human action.

## **LUDWIG VON MISES ON HUMAN ACTION**

Ludwig von Mises's conception of human action originates with the idea that there is a very clear distinction between human behavior that is purposive and goal-

driven, and behavior that is merely reflexive and instinctual.<sup>1</sup> All human behavior that is purposive and goal-driven is considered by Mises to be “action,” while all human behavior that is merely instinctual and reflexive is conceptually excluded from the category of action. Based upon this understanding of human action, Mises views it as possible to discover characteristics about all human action regardless of the purpose of the action, time, or place. The science of deducing these characteristics shared by all human action Mises termed *praxeology*.<sup>2</sup>

The first principle underlying Mises’s understanding of human action is the proposition “man acts.”<sup>3</sup> This proposition implies other propositions, such as: “All human action aims at realizing some end in the future using some means,” and “human action involves a choice between alternative courses of action.”<sup>4</sup> According to this conception of human action, the status of any actor in relation to other human beings is irrelevant. These characteristics of human action hold for Robinson Crusoe’s purposive behavior on an isolated island just as much as they hold for Socrates in view of other people.

Interestingly, while Ludwig von Mises explicitly emphasizes the factor of choice involved in every human action, he is at the same time a determinist.<sup>5</sup> He also emphasizes the important role of the “pioneering genius” who “[cuts] out new paths for mankind,”<sup>6</sup> even though he eschews the idea that man has free will. In addition, while Mises argues that it is possible to discover characteristics about human action that hold

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<sup>1</sup> Ludwig von Mises, *Human Action: A Treatise on Economics*, 4th rev. ed. (Irvington-on-Hudson, N.Y.: Foundation for Economic Education, 1996), pp. 11-13.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.30-38.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 92-94.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, loc. cit.

<sup>5</sup> “*Ibid.*, p. 46., and David Gordon, *The Philosophical Origins of Austrian Economics* (Auburn, Ala.: Ludwig von Mises Institute, 1996).p. 53.

<sup>6</sup> Mises, *Human Action*, pp. 139-140.

for all people at all times, he does not consider his exposition of these universal characteristics as a form of human nature.<sup>7</sup>

In order to evaluate Ludwig von Mises's theory of human action, it is necessary to ask the penultimate epistemological question about his theory: *How* does he know what he claims to know about human action? Mises claims that his explication of human action is logically irrefutable.<sup>8</sup> This claim is based upon the assumption that it is possible to discover true synthetic *a priori* propositions about human action. These true synthetic *a priori* propositions about human action cannot be refuted because any attempted refutation of them would be self-contradictory. Any conceivable attempted refutation, for example, of the proposition "man acts" would *itself* be an action. Similarly, any conceivable attempted refutation of the proposition "man uses means in order to attain some end in the future" would *itself* be an action using means in an attempt to realize some end in the future. In short, Mises claims that his theory of human action is true because it would be logically impossible to refute any of the axioms underlying his theory without self-contradiction.

### HANNAH ARENDT ON HUMAN ACTION

In contrast to Ludwig von Mises, for whom *all* purposive behavior was considered action, Arendt reserves the term for a special subclass of purposive behavior. She accomplishes this by initially dividing human behavior into three classes: labor, work and action.<sup>9</sup> The concept of "action" is reserved for purposive human behavior that takes

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<sup>7</sup> Murray N. Rothbard, "Ludwig Von Mises and Natural Law: A Reply to Professor Gonce," *The Journal of Libertarian Studies* 4 (Summer, 1980).

<sup>8</sup> Ludwig von Mises, *Epistemological Problems of Economics*, 3rd ed. (Auburn, Ala.: Ludwig von Mises Institute, 2003).pp. 28-32. Importantly, however, Mises belief in determinism and his eschewal of natural law are not claimed by him to be known to be true *a priori*.

<sup>9</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), pp. 7-9.

place in the presence of other people. Whereas Mises considers the presence of witnesses as irrelevant to the definition of human action, Arendt makes witnesses to man's behavior the defining feature of action as distinguished from labor and work. Arendt, like Mises, claims that all of these types of human behavior involve means-ends calculations and individual motives. Unlike Mises, however, she considers action to be a form of purposive behavior that is not solely concerned with these ends-means calculations. Instead, human action, unlike labor and work, is inspired by additional external factors which Arendt calls "principles." In sum, human action for Arendt is a purely public and interpersonal form of purposive human behavior that is externally inspired by "principles."

Arendt's conception of human action shares some other interesting features with Ludwig von Mises's conception. Like Ludwig von Mises, Arendt explicitly recognizes an element of choice contained in political action,<sup>10</sup> (at least insofar as man chooses which principles to act upon), and yet she is similarly unwilling to ascribe to this choice the label of "free choice." She also recognizes the capacity of the political actor to initiate something completely new in the world, (much like Mises's "pioneering genius"), while at the same time, like Mises, she denies that this capacity to initiate something new constitutes a form of free choice. Finally, Arendt, like Ludwig von Mises, completely eschews the idea that man has a definite human nature that can be rationally discovered.<sup>11</sup>

If we ask the same epistemological question of Arendt that we asked of Mises's, (i.e., *how* does she know what she claims to know?), however, we find a radical divergence between Mises and Arendt. In the first place, Mises's epistemological

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<sup>10</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Life of the Mind* (New York: Harcourt, 1978), p. 34.

<sup>11</sup> Arendt, *The Human Condition*, p. 10.

position is explicit and unwavering; he is ultimately an Aristotelian rationalist,<sup>12</sup> and his argument stems from deductions from *a priori* axioms which he goes to great pains to establish. In contrast, Arendt's epistemological position is decidedly unclear and never explicitly articulated. She claims to know a great deal about human action and the human mind, but she never explicitly informs us about *how* she came to know what she claims to know, and never informs us of the reasons we should adopt her theory of human action over other theories (e.g., Mises's).

She tells us, for example, that "To be alive means to be possessed by an urge toward self-display which answers the fact of one's own appearingness,"<sup>13</sup> but she never gives us any reason to believe that this claim *must* be true. Since this claim is not intuitively obvious, and the contradictory claim (living things do *not* have an urge toward self-display) is not completely unthinkable (it is possible to imagine that living things would appear in the world for reasons unrelated to appearance itself), its epistemological status is completely ambiguous. The same is true for virtually all of her assertions about human action. This is not to say that her claims about human action are necessarily mistaken for this reason alone, but without any discussion of the epistemological status of these claims it is virtually impossible to tell if her claims about human action are necessarily true statements, or merely opinions.

### **MISES'S RATIONALISM VERSUS ARENDT'S QUASI-EMPIRICISM**

The root cause of the difference between Arendt's and Mises's conceptions about human action is their radically different conception of human knowledge in general. Mises's theory of human action stems from the rationalist belief that it is possible to

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<sup>12</sup> Gordon, *The Philosophical Origins of Austrian Economics.*, pp. 30-31.

<sup>13</sup> Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, p. 21.

discover necessarily true propositions about human action in general that would apply to every *actual* human action, which can be synthesized into a grand theory of human action.

Arendt's theory of human action, on the other hand, stems from a belief in a particular form of empiricism derived from phenomenological tradition.<sup>14</sup> She espouses a radical form of empiricism which assumes that only things capable of being apprehended by the senses have any existence, much like the Viennese logical positivists. Arendt goes even further than the logical positivists, however. Whereas the logical positivist had claimed that the existing world consists only of things that are *potentially* capable of being apprehended by the senses, Arendt goes one step further and restricts the existing world to those things which are *actually* apprehended by a spectator.<sup>15</sup> Leaving aside this queer ontological position, her espousal of a more radical form of empiricism than even the logical positivists had defended lies at the root of her theory of human action. This form of empiricism essentially rules out the possibility of obtaining the kind of certain and universal knowledge about human action that Mises's theory purports to provide. In fact, since Arendt has linked perception and being, an objective reality capable of being rationally and universally understood *does not even exist*.<sup>16</sup> Instead, our knowledge of world in general and human action in particular must be derived from each individual's perception of the world.

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<sup>14</sup> Interestingly, however, both Mises's rationalist epistemological position and Arendt's phenomenological empiricism can be traced back to the influence of the Austrian philosopher Franz Brentano. Brentano heavily influenced Husserl, who was instrumental in the creation of the phenomenological tradition, and he also heavily influenced Carl Menger who subsequently founded the Austrian School of economics. See especially, Barry Smith, *Austrian Philosophy: The Legacy of Franz Brentano* (Chicago: Open Court, 1994), and David Gordon, *op. cit.* pp. 20-21.

<sup>15</sup> "*Being and appearing coincide.*" Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, p. 19. Emphasis in original.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 37-40.

## CONCLUSION

Having established the rudimentary epistemological foundations of Arendt and Mises's theories of human action, it is now possible to evaluate their theoretical merit. First, it is well to note that Mises's epistemological position and his method for investigating human action, is capable of being rationally defended. When asked how he knows what he claims to know about human action, Mises can respond by pointing to axioms that are not capable of refutation without self-contradiction as the foundation for his theory. Arendt's theory of human action, on the other hand, seems to almost defy rational defense by definition. Without an objective reality which might be capable of being understood in an objective and universal manner, there would appear to be no way to rationally defend the theory that posits such a world.

Interestingly, however, and this seems to be one of the most crippling theoretical weakness of Arendt's theory of human action, Arendt seems to be arguing that her theory is in fact objectively and universally true.<sup>17</sup> Insofar as she does consider her theory of human action as objectively and universally true, she seems to have presented us with an objectively and universally true theory about existence that is supposedly not objectively real. Her theory claims more objective reality than the phenomena it is meant to explain. This is a crippling and self-contradictory feature of her theory because *she herself* is an acting person, and is therefore part of the non-objectively real world her theory is meant to explain. We are then left with a paradoxical and self-contradictory theory which purports to be objectively true, but which sprang from the brain of a being whose objective existence cannot be established. In the light of this deficiency in her theory, it

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<sup>17</sup> If she is not claiming this, then why should anyone believe in her theory?

is truly unfortunate that Hannah Arendt's theory of human action has been so much more favorably received in the academic world than that of Ludwig von Mises.

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