

*The  
Human  
Condition*

---

BY HANNAH ARENDT

---

*Second Edition*

Introduction by  
Margaret Canovan



THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO PRESS  
CHICAGO & LONDON

The University of Chicago Press, Chicago 60637

The University of Chicago Press, Ltd., London

© 1958 by The University of Chicago

Introduction by Margaret Canovan © 1998 by The University of Chicago

All rights reserved. Published 1998

07 06 05 04

4 5

ISBN: 0-226-02599-3 (cloth)

ISBN: 0-226-02598-5 (paper)

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Arendt, Hannah.

The human condition / by Hannah Arendt; introduction by Margaret Canovan. — 2nd ed.

p. cm.

Originally published: Chicago : University of Chicago Press, 1958.

Includes index.

ISBN 0-226-02599-3 (cloth : alk. paper)

ISBN 0-226-02598-5 (pbk.: alk. paper)

1. Sociology. 2. Economics. 3. Technology. I. Title.

HM211.A7 1998

301—dc21

98-17015

CIP

© The paper used in this publication meets the minimum requirements of the American National Standard for Information Sciences—Permanence of Paper for Printed Library Materials, ANSI Z39.48-1992.

# Table of Contents

Introduction by Margaret Canovan	vii
Prologue	1
<i>I. The Human Condition</i>	
1. <i>Vita Activa</i> and the Human Condition	7
2. The Term <i>Vita Activa</i>	12
3. Eternity versus Immortality	17
<i>II. The Public and the Private Realm</i>	
4. Man: A Social or a Political Animal	22
5. The <i>Polls</i> and the Household	28
6. The Rise of the Social	38
7. The Public Realm: The Common	50
8. The Private Realm: Property	58
9. The Social and the Private	68
10. The Location of Human Activities	73
<i>III. Labor</i>	
11. "The Labour of Our Body and the Work of Our Hands"	79
12. The Thing-Character of the World	93
13. Labor and Life	96
14. Labor and Fertility	101
15. The Privacy of Property and Wealth	109
16. The Instruments of Work and the Division of Labor	118
17. A Consumers' Society	126

# Table of Contents

---

## IV. *Work*

18. The Durability of the World	136
19. Reification	139
20. Instrumentality and <i>Animal Laborans</i>	144
21. Instrumentality and <i>Homo Faber</i>	153
22. The Exchange Market	159
23. The Permanence of the World and the Work of Art	167

## V. *Action*

24. The Disclosure of the Agent in Speech and Action	175
25. The Web of Relationships and the Enacted Stories	181
26. The Frailty of Human Affairs	188
27. The Greek Solution	192
28. Power and the Space of Appearance	199
29. <i>Homo Faber</i> and the Space of Appearance	207
30. The Labor Movement	212
31. The Traditional Substitution of Making for Acting	220
32. The Process Character of Action	230
33. Irreversibility and the Power To Forgive	236
34. Unpredictability and the Power of Promise	243

## VI. *The Vita Activa and the Modern Age*

35. World Alienation	248
36. The Discovery of the Archimedean Point	257
37. Universal versus Natural Science	268
38. The Rise of the Cartesian Doubt	273
39. Introspection and the Loss of Common Sense	280
40. Thought and the Modern World View	285
41. The Reversal of Contemplation and Action	289
42. The Reversal within the <i>Vita Activa</i> and the Victory of <i>Homo Faber</i>	294
43. The Defeat of <i>Homo Faber</i> and the Principle of Happiness	305
44. Life as the Highest Good	313
45. The Victory of the <i>Animal Laborans</i>	320
Acknowledgments	327
Index	329

## *The Human Condition*

---

having watched with his own eyes how these dots were thrown arbitrarily and without foresight onto the paper, is shown and forced to admit that all his senses and all his powers of judgment have betrayed him and that what he saw was the evolution of a "geometrical line whose direction is constantly and uniformly defined by one rule."<sup>23</sup>

### 37

#### UNIVERSAL VERSUS NATURAL SCIENCE

It took many generations and quite a few centuries before the true meaning of the Copernican revolution and the discovery of the Archimedean point came to light. Only we, and we only for hardly more than a few decades, have come to live in a world thoroughly determined by a science and a technology whose objective truth and practical know-how are derived from cosmic and universal, as distinguished from terrestrial and "natural," laws, and in which a knowledge acquired by selecting a point of reference outside the earth is applied to earthly nature and the human artifice. There is a deep gulf between those before us who knew that the earth revolves around the sun, that neither the one nor the other is the center of the universe, and who concluded that man had lost his home as well as his privileged position in creation, and ourselves, who still and probably forever are earth-bound creatures, dependent upon metabolism with a terrestrial nature, and who have found the means to bring about processes of cosmic origin and possibly cosmic dimension. If one wishes to draw a distinctive line between the modern age and the world we have come to live in, he may well find it in the difference between a science which looks upon nature from a universal standpoint and thus acquires complete mastery over her, on one hand, and a truly "universal" science, on the other, which imports cosmic processes into nature even at the obvious risk of destroying her and, with her, man's mastership over her.

Foremost in our minds at this moment is of course the enormously increased human power of destruction, that we are able to

23. Leibniz, *Discours de mhapysique*, No. 6.

## *The Vita Activa and the Modern Age*

---

destroy all organic life on earth and shall probably be able one day to destroy even the earth itself. However, no less awesome and no less difficult to come to terms with is the corresponding new creative power, that we can produce new elements never found in nature, that we are able not only to speculate about the relationships between mass and energy and their innermost identity but actually to transform mass into energy or to transform radiation into matter. At the same time, we have begun to populate the space surrounding the earth with man-made stars, creating as it were, in the form of satellites, new heavenly bodies, and we hope that in a not very distant future we shall be able to perform what times before us regarded as the greatest, the deepest, and holiest secret of nature, to create or re-create the miracle of life. I use the word "create" deliberately, to indicate that we are actually doing what all ages before ours thought to be the exclusive prerogative of divine action.

This thought strikes us as blasphemous, and though it is blasphemous in every traditional Western or Eastern philosophic or theological frame of reference, it is no more blasphemous than what we have been doing and what we are aspiring to do. The thought loses its blasphemous character, however, as soon as we understand what Archimedes understood so well, even though he did not know how to reach his point outside the earth, namely, that no matter how we explain the evolution of the earth and nature and man, they must have come into being by some transmundane, "universal" force, whose work must be comprehensible to the point of imitation by somebody who is able to occupy the same location. It is ultimately nothing but this assumed location in the universe outside the earth that enables us to produce processes which do not occur on the earth and play no role in stable matter but are decisive for the coming into being of matter. It is indeed in the very nature of the thing that astrophysics and not geophysics, that "universal" science and not "natural" science, should have been able to penetrate the last secrets of the earth and of nature. From the viewpoint of the universe, the earth is but a special case and can be understood as such, just as in this view there cannot be a decisive distinc-

## *The Human Condition*

---

tion between matter and energy, both being "only different forms of the selfsame basic substance."<sup>24</sup>

With Galileo already, certainly since Newton, the word "universal" has begun to acquire a very specific meaning indeed; it means "valid beyond our solar system." And something quite similar has happened to another word of philosophic origin, the word "absolute," which is applied to "absolute time," "absolute space," "absolute motion," or "absolute speed," in each usage meaning a time, a space, a movement, a velocity which is present in the universe and compared to which earth-bound time or space or movement or speed are only "relative." Everything happening on earth has become relative since the earth's relatedness to the universe became the point of reference for all measurements.

Philosophically, it seems that man's ability to take this cosmic, universal standpoint without changing his location is the clearest possible indication of his universal origin, as it were. It is as though we no longer needed theology to tell us that man is not, cannot possibly be, of this world even though he spends his life here; and we may one day be able to look upon the age-old enthusiasm of philosophers for the universal as the first indication, as though they alone possessed a foreboding, that the time would come when men would have to live under the earth's conditions and at the same time be able to look upon and act on her from a point outside. (The trouble is only—or so it seems now—that while man can *do* things from a "universal," absolute standpoint, what the philosophers had never deemed possible, he has lost his capacity to *think* in universal, absolute terms, thus realizing and defeating at the same time the standards and ideals of traditional philosophy. Instead of the old dichotomy between earth and sky we have a new one between man and the universe, or between the capacities of the human mind for understanding and the universal laws which man can discover and handle without true comprehension.) Whatever the rewards and the burdens of this yet uncertain future may turn out to be, one thing is sure: while it may affect greatly, perhaps even radically, the vocabulary and metaphoric content of existing religions, it

24. I follow the presentation given by Werner Heisenberg, "Elementarteile der Materie," in *Vom Atom zum Weltsystem* (1954).

## *The Vita Activa and the Modern Age*

---

neither abolishes nor removes nor even shifts the unknown that is the region of faith.

While the new science, the science of the Archimedean point, needed centuries and generations to develop its full potentialities, taking roughly two hundred years before it even began to change the world and to establish new conditions for the life of man, it took no more than a few decades, hardly one generation, for the human mind to draw certain conclusions from Galileo's discoveries and the methods and assumption by which they had been accomplished. The human mind changed in a matter of years or decades as radically as the human world in a matter of centuries; and while this change naturally remained restricted to the few who belonged to that strangest of all modern societies, the society of scientists and the republic of letters (the only society which has survived all changes of conviction and conflict without a revolution and without ever forgetting to "honor the man whose beliefs it no longer shares"),<sup>26</sup> this society anticipated in many respects, by sheer force of trained and controlled imagination, the radical change of mind of all modern men which became a politically demonstrable reality only in our own time.<sup>26</sup> Descartes is no less the father of modern

25. Bronowski, *op. dt.*

26. The foundation and early history of the Royal Society is quite suggestive. When it was founded, members had to agree to take no part in matters outside the terms of reference given it by the King, especially to take no part in political or religious strife. One is tempted to conclude that the modern scientific ideal of "objectivity" was born here, which would suggest that its origin is political and not scientific. Furthermore, it seems noteworthy that the scientists found it necessary from the beginning to organize themselves into a society, and the fact that the work done inside the Royal Society turned out to be vastly more important than work done outside it demonstrated how right they were. An organization, whether of scientists who have abjured politics or of politicians, is always a political institution; where men organize they intend to act and to acquire power. No scientific teamwork is pure science, whether its aim is to act upon society and secure its members a certain position within it or—as was and still is to a large extent the case of organized research in the natural sciences—to act together and in concert in order to conquer nature. It is indeed, as Whitehead once remarked, "no accident that an age of science has developed into an age of organisation. Organised thought is the basis of organised action," not, one is tempted to add, because thought is the basis of action but rather because modern science as "the organisation of thought" introduced an element of action into thinking. (See *The Aims of Education* [Mentor ed.], pp. 106-7.)



## *The Human Condition*

---

philosophy than Galileo is the ancestor of modern science, and while it is true that after the seventeenth century, and chiefly because of the development of modern philosophy, science and philosophy parted company more radically than ever before<sup>27</sup>—Newton was almost the last to consider his own endeavors as "experimental philosophy" and to offer his discoveries to the reflection of "astronomers and philosophers,"<sup>28</sup> as Kant was the last philosopher who was also a kind of astronomer and natural scientist<sup>29</sup>—modern philosophy owes its origin and its course more exclusively to specific scientific discoveries than any previous philosophy. That this philosophy, the exact counterpart of a scientific world view long since discarded, has not become obsolete today is not only due to the nature of philosophy, which, wherever it is authentic, possesses the same permanence and durability as art works, but is in this particular case closely related to the eventual evolution of a world where truths for many centuries accessible only to the few have become realities for everybody.

It would be folly indeed to overlook the almost too precise congruity of modern man's world alienation with the subjectivism of modern philosophy, from Descartes and Hobbes to English sensualism, empiricism, and pragmatism, as well as German idealism and materialism up to the recent phenomenological existentialism and logical or epistemological positivism. But it would be equally foolish to believe that what turned the philosopher's mind away from the old metaphysical questions toward a great variety of introspections—introspection into his sensual or cognitive apparatus, into his consciousness, into psychological and logical processes—was an impetus that grew out of an autonomous development of ideas, or, in a variation of the same approach, to believe that our world would have become different if only philosophy had held

27. Karl Jaspers, in his masterful interpretation of Cartesian philosophy, insists on the strange ineptitude of Descartes' "scientific" ideas, his lack of understanding for the spirit of modern science, and his inclination to accept theories uncritically without tangible evidence, which had already surprised Spinoza (*op. cit.*, esp. pp. SO ff. and 93 ff.).

28. See Newton's *Mathematical Principles of Natural Philosophy*, trans. Motte (1803), II, 314.

29. Among Kant's early publications was an *Allgemeine Naturgeschichte und Theorie des Himmels*.

## *The Vita Activa and the Modern Age*

---

fast to tradition. As we said before, not ideas but events change the world—the heliocentric system as an idea is as old as Pythagorean speculation and as persistent in our history as Neo-Platonic traditions, without, for that matter, ever having changed the world or the human mind—and the author of the decisive event of the modern age is Galileo rather than Descartes. Descartes himself was quite aware of this, and when he heard of Galileo's trial and his recantation, he was tempted for a moment to burn all his papers, because "if the movement of the earth is false, all the foundations of my philosophy are also false."<sup>30</sup> But Descartes and the philosophers, since they elevated what had happened to the level of uncompromising thought, registered with unequalled precision the enormous shock of the event; they anticipated, at least partially, the very perplexities inherent in the new standpoint of man with which the scientists were too busy to bother until, in our own time, they began to appear in their own work and to interfere with their own inquiries. Since then, the curious discrepancy between the mood of modern philosophy, which from the beginning had been predominantly pessimistic, and the mood of modern science, which until very recently had been so buoyantly optimistic, has been bridged. There seems to be little cheerfulness left in either of them.

### 38

#### THE RISE OF THE CARTESIAN DOUBT

Modern philosophy began with Descartes' *de omnibus dubitandum est*, with doubt, but with doubt not as an inherent control of the human mind to guard against deceptions of thought and illusions of sense, not as skepticism against the morals and prejudices of men and times, not even as a critical method in scientific inquiry and philosophic speculation. Cartesian doubt is much more far-reaching in scope and too fundamental in intent to be determined by such concrete contents. In modern philosophy and thought, doubt occupies much the same central position as that occupied for all the centuries before by the Greek *thaumazein*, the wonder at everything that is as it is. Descartes was the first to conceptualize this modern doubting, which after him became the self-evident, in-

30. See Descartes' letter to Mersenne of November, 1633.

## *The Human Condition*

---

---

audible motor which has moved all thought, the invisible axis around which all thinking has been centered. Just as from Plato and Aristotle to the modern age conceptual philosophy, in its greatest and most authentic representatives, had been the articulation of wonder, so modern philosophy since Descartes has consisted in the articulations and ramifications of doubting.

Cartesian doubt, in its radical and universal significance, was originally the response to a new reality, a reality no less real for its being restricted for centuries to the small and politically insignificant circle of scholars and learned men. The philosophers understood at once that Galileo's discoveries implied no mere challenge to the testimony of the senses and that it was no longer reason, as in Aristarchus and Copernicus, that had "committed such a rape on their senses," in which case men indeed would have needed only to choose between their faculties and to let innate reason become "the mistress of their credulity."<sup>31</sup> It was not reason but a man-made instrument, the telescope, which actually changed the physical world view; it was not contemplation, observation, and speculation which led to the new knowledge, but the active stepping in of *homo faber*, of making and fabricating. In other words, man had been deceived so long as he trusted that reality and truth would reveal themselves to his senses and to his reason if only he remained true to what he saw with the eyes of body and mind. The old opposition of sensual and rational truth, of the inferior truth capacity of the senses and the superior truth capacity of reason, paled beside this challenge, beside the obvious implication that neither truth nor reality is given, that neither of them appears as it is, and that only interference with appearance, doing away with appearances, can hold out a hope for true knowledge.

The extent to which reason and faith in reason depend not upon single sense perceptions, each of which may be an illusion, but upon the unquestioned assumption that the senses as a whole—kept together and ruled over by common sense, the sixth and the highest sense—fit man into the reality which surrounds him, was only now

31. In these words, Galileo expresses his admiration for Copernicus and Aristarchus, whose reason "was able . . . to commit such a rape on their senses, as in despite thereof to make herself mistress of their credulity" (*Dialogues concerning the Two Great Systems of the World*, trans. Saksbury [1661], p. 301).

## *The Vita Activa and the Modern Age*

---

discovered. If the human eye can betray man to the extent that so many generations of men were deceived into believing that the sun turns around the earth, then the metaphor of the eyes of the mind cannot possibly hold any longer; it was based, albeit implicitly and even when it was used in opposition to the senses, on an ultimate trust in bodily vision. If Being and Appearance part company forever, and this—as Marx once remarked—is indeed the basic assumption of all modern science, then there is nothing left to be taken upon faith; everything must be doubted. It was as though Democritus' early prediction that a victory of the mind over the senses could end only in the mind's defeat had come true, except that now the reading of an instrument seemed to have won a victory over both the mind and the senses.<sup>31a</sup>

The outstanding characteristic of Cartesian doubt is its universality, that nothing, no thought and no experience, can escape it. No one perhaps explored its true dimensions more honestly than Kierkegaard when he leaped—not from reason, as he thought, but from doubt—into belief, thereby carrying doubt into the very heart of modern religion.<sup>32</sup> Its universality spreads from the testimony of the senses to the testimony of reason to the testimony of faith because this doubt resides ultimately in the loss of self-evidence, and all thought had always started from what is evident in and by itself—evident not only for the thinker but for everybody. Cartesian doubt did not simply doubt that human understanding may not be open to every truth or that human vision may not be able to see everything, but that intelligibility to human understanding does not at all constitute a demonstration of truth, just as visibility did not at all constitute proof of reality. This doubt doubts

31a. Democritus, after having stated that "in reality there is no white, or black, or bitter, or sweet," added: "Poor mind, from the senses you take your arguments, and then want to defeat them? Your victory is your defeat" (Diels, *Fragmente der Vorsokratiker* [4th ed., 1922], frag. B125).

32. See *Johannes Climacus oder De omnibus dubkandum est*, one of the earliest manuscripts of Kierkegaard and perhaps still the deepest interpretation of Cartesian doubt. It tells in the form of a spiritual autobiography how he learned about Descartes from Hegel and then regretted not having started his philosophical studies with his works. This little treatise, the Danish edition of the *Collected Works* (Copenhagen, 1909), Vol. IV, is available in a German translation (Darmstadt, 1948).

## *The Human Condition*

---

that such a thing as truth exists at all, and discovers thereby that the traditional concept of truth, whether based on sense perception or on reason or on belief in divine revelation, had rested on the twofold assumption that what truly is will appear of its own accord and that human capabilities are adequate to receive it.<sup>33</sup> That truth reveals itself was the common creed of pagan and Hebrew antiquity, of Christian and secular philosophy. This is the reason why the new, modern philosophy turned with such vehemence—in fact with a violence bordering on hatred—against tradition, making short shrift of the enthusiastic Renaissance revival and rediscovery of antiquity.

The poignancy of Descartes' doubt is fully realized only if one understands that the new discoveries dealt an even more disastrous blow to human confidence in the world and in the universe than is indicated by a clear-cut separation of being and appearance. For here the relationship between these two is no longer static as it was in traditional skepticism, as though appearances simply hide and cover a true being which forever escapes the notice of man. This Being, on the contrary, is tremendously active and energetic: it creates its own appearances, except that these appearances are delusions. Whatever human senses perceive is brought about by invisible, secret forces, and if through certain devices, ingenious instruments, these forces are caught in the act rather than discovered—as an animal is trapped or a thief is caught much against their own will and intentions—it turns out that this tremendously effec-

33. The close relatedness of confidence in the senses and confidence in reason in the traditional concept of truth was clearly recognized by Pascal. According to him: "Ces deux principes de verite, la raison et les sens, outre qu'ils manquent chacun de sincerite, s'abusent reciproquement l'un et l'autre. Les sens abusent la raison par de fausses apparences; et cette meme piperie qu'ils apportent a la raison, ils la recoivent d'elle a leur tour: elle s'en revanche. Les passions de l'ame troublent les sens, et leur font des impressions fausses. Ils mentent et se trompent a l'envi" (*Pensees* [Pleiades ed., 1950], No. 92, p. 849). Pascal's famous wager that he certainly would risk less by believing what Christianity has to teach about a hereafter than by disbelieving it is sufficient demonstration of the interrelatedness of rational and sensory truth with the truth of divine revelation. To Pascal, as to Descartes, God is *un Dieu cache* (*ibid.*, No. 366, p. 923) who does not reveal himself, but whose existence and even goodness is the only hypothetical guaranty that human life is not a dream (the Cartesian nightmare recurs in Pascal, *ibid.*, No. 380, p. 928) and human knowledge not a divine fraud.

## *The Vita Activa and the Modern Age*

---

five Being is of such a nature that its disclosures must be illusions and that conclusions drawn from its appearances must be delusions.

Descartes' philosophy is haunted by two nightmares which in a sense became the nightmares of the whole modern age, not because this age was so deeply influenced by Cartesian philosophy, but because their emergence was almost inescapable once the true implications of the modern world view were understood. These nightmares are very simple and very well known. In the one, reality, the reality of the world as well as of human life, is doubted; if neither the senses nor common sense nor reason can be trusted, then it may well be that all that we take for reality is only a dream. The other concerns the general human condition as it was revealed by the new discoveries and the impossibility for man to trust his senses and his reason; under these circumstances it seems, indeed, much more likely that an evil spirit, a *Dieu trompeur*, wilfully and spitefully betrays man than that God is the ruler of the universe. The consummate devilry of this evil spirit would consist in having created a creature which harbors a notion of truth only to bestow on it such other faculties that it will never be able to reach any truth, never be able to be certain of anything.

Indeed, this last point, the question of certainty, was to become decisive for the whole development of modern morality. What was lost in the modern age, of course, was not the capacity for truth or reality or faith nor the concomitant inevitable acceptance of the testimony of the senses and of reason, but the certainty that formerly went with it. In religion it was not belief in salvation or a hereafter that was immediately lost, but the *certitudo salutis*—and this happened in all Protestant countries where the downfall of the Catholic Church had eliminated the last tradition-bound institution which, wherever its authority remained unchallenged, stood between the impact of modernity and the masses of believers. Just as the immediate consequence of this loss of certainty was a new zeal for making good in this life as though it were only an overlong period of probation,<sup>34</sup> so the loss of certainty of truth ended in a

34. Max Weber, who, despite some errors in detail which by now have been corrected, is still the only historian who raised the question of the modern age with the depth and relevance corresponding to its importance, was also aware that it was not a simple loss of faith that caused the reversal in the estimate of

## *The Human Condition*

---

new, entirely unprecedented zeal for truthfulness—as though man could afford to be a liar only so long as he was certain of the unchallengeable existence of truth and objective reality, which surely would survive and defeat all his lies.<sup>86</sup> The radical change in moral standards occurring in the first century of the modern age was inspired by the needs and ideals of its most important group of men, the new scientists; and the modern cardinal virtues—success, industry, and truthfulness—are at the same time the greatest virtues of modern science.<sup>36</sup>

The learned societies and Royal Academies became the morally influential centers where scientists were organized to find ways and means by which nature could be trapped by experiments and instruments so that she would be forced to yield her secrets. And this gigantic task, to which no single man but only the collective effort of the best minds of mankind could possibly be adequate, prescribed the rules of behavior and the new standards of judgment. Where formerly truth had resided in the kind of "theory" that since the Greeks had meant the contemplative glance of the beholder who was concerned with, and received, the reality opening up before him, the question of success took over and the test of theory became a "practical" one—whether or not it will work. Theory became hypothesis, and the success of the hypothesis became truth. This all-important standard of success, however, does not depend upon practical considerations or the technical developments which may or may not accompany specific scientific discoveries. The criterion of success is inherent in the very essence and progress of modern science quite apart from its applicability. Success here is not at all the empty idol to which it degenerated in

work and labor, but the loss of the *certitudo salutis*, of the certainty of salvation. In our context, it would appear that this certainty was only one among the many certainties lost with the arrival of the modern age.

35. It certainly is quite striking that not one of the major religions, with the exception of Zoroastrianism, has ever included lying as such among the mortal sins. Not only is there no commandment: Thou shalt not lie (for the commandment: Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbor, is of course of a different nature), but it seems as though prior to puritan morality nobody ever considered lies to be serious offenses.

36. This is the chief point of Bronowski's article quoted above.

## *The Vita Activa and the Modern Age*

---

bourgeois society; it was, and in the sciences has been ever since, a veritable triumph of human ingenuity against overwhelming odds. The Cartesian solution of universal doubt or its salvation from the two interconnected nightmares—that everything is a dream and there is no reality and that not God but an evil spirit rules the world and mocks man—was similar in method and content to the turning away from truth to truthfulness and from reality to reliability. Descartes' conviction that "though our mind is not the measure of things or of truth, it must assuredly be the measure of things that we affirm or deny"<sup>37</sup> echoes what scientists in general and without explicit articulation had discovered: that even if there is no truth, man can be truthful, and even if there is no reliable certainty, man can be reliable. If there was salvation, it had to lie in man himself, and if there was a solution to the questions raised by doubting, it had to come from doubting. If everything has become doubtful, then doubting at least is certain and real. Whatever may be the state of reality and of truth as they are given to the senses and to reason, "nobody can doubt of his doubt and remain uncertain whether he doubts or does not doubt."<sup>38</sup> The famous *cogito ergo sum* ("I think, hence I am") did not spring for Descartes from any self-certainty of thought as such—in which case, indeed, thought would have acquired a new dignity and significance for man—but was a mere generalization of a *dubito ergo sum*.<sup>39</sup> In

37. From a letter of Descartes to Henry More, quoted from Koyre, *op. cit.*, p. 117.

38. In the dialogue *La recherche de la verite par la lumiere naturelle*, where Descartes exposes his fundamental insights without technical formality, the central position of doubting is even more in evidence than in his other works. Thus Eudoxe, who stands for Descartes, explains: "Vous pouvez douter avec raison de toutes les choses dont la connaissance ne vous vient que par l'office des sens; mais pouvez-vous douter de votre doute et rester incertain si vous doutez ou non? . . . vous qui doutez vous etes, et cela est si vrai que vous n'en pouvez douter davantage" (Pleiade ed., p. 680).

39. "Je doute, done je suis, ou bien ce qui est la meme chose: je pense, done je suis" (*ibid.*, p. 687). Thought in Descartes has indeed a mere derivative character: "Car s'il est vrai que je doute, comme je n'en puis douter, il est egalement vrai que je pense; en effet douter est-il autre chose que penser d'une certaine maniere?" (*ibid.*, p. 686). The leading idea of this philosophy is by no means that I would not be able to think without being, but that "nous ne saurions douter sans etre, et que cela est la premiere connaissance certaine qu'on peut acquerir" (*Prin-*



## The Human Condition

---

other words, from the mere logical certainty that in doubting something I remain aware of a process of doubting in my consciousness, Descartes concluded that those processes which go on in the mind of man himself have a certainty of their own, that they can become the object of investigation in introspection.

### 39

#### INTROSPECTION AND THE LOSS OF COMMON SENSE

Introspection, as a matter of fact, not the reflection of man's mind on the state of his soul or body but the sheer cognitive concern of consciousness with its own content (and this is the essence of the Cartesian *cogitatio*, where *cogito* always means *cogito me cogitare*) must yield certainty, because here nothing is involved except what the mind has produced itself; nobody is interfering but the producer of the product, man is confronted with nothing and nobody but himself. Long before the natural and physical sciences began to wonder if man is capable of encountering, knowing, and comprehending anything except himself, modern philosophy had made sure in introspection that man concerns himself only with himself. Descartes believed that the certainty yielded by his new method of introspection is the certainty of the I-am.<sup>40</sup> Man, in other words, carries his certainty, the certainty of his existence, within himself; the sheer functioning of consciousness, though it cannot possibly assure a worldly reality given to the senses and to reason, confirms beyond doubt the reality of sensations and of reasoning, that is, the reality of processes which go on in the mind. These are not unlike

---

*cipes* [Pleiade ed.], Part I, sec. 7). The argument itself is of course not new. One finds it, for instance, almost word for word in Augustine's *De libero arbhrrio* (ch. 3), but without the implication that this is the only certainty against the possibility of a *Dieu trompeur* and, generally, without being the very fundament of a philosophical system.

40. That the *cogito ergo sum* contains a logical error, that, as Nietzsche pointed out, it should read: *cogito, ergo cogitationes sunt*, and that therefore the mental awareness expressed in the *cogito* does not prove that I am, but only that consciousness is, is another matter and need not interest us here (see Nietzsche, *Wille zur Macht*, No. 484).