**http://www.iep.utm.edu/arendt/#H4**

**4. The Human Condition**

The work of establishing the conditions of possibility for political experience, as opposed to other spheres of human activity, was undertaken by Arendt in her next major work, *The Human Condition* (1958). In this work she undertakes a thorough historical-philosophical inquiry that returned to the origins of both democracy and political philosophy in the Ancient Greek world, and brought these originary understandings of political life to bear on what Arendt saw as its atrophy and eclipse in the modern era. Her goal was to propose a phenomenological reconstruction of different aspects of human activity, so as to better discern the type of action and engagement that corresponded to present political existence. In doing so, she offers a stringent critique of traditional of political philosophy, and the dangers it presents to the political sphere as an autonomous domain of human practice.

*The Human Condition* is fundamentally concerned with the problem of reasserting the politics as a valuable ream of human action, *praxis*, and the world of appearances. Arendt argues that the Western philosophical tradition has devalued the world of human action which attends to appearances (the *vita activa*), subordinating it to the life of contemplation which concerns itself with essences and the eternal (the *vita contemplativa*). The prime culprit is Plato, whose metaphysics subordinates action and appearances to the eternal realm of the Ideas. The allegory of The Cave in *The Republic* begins the tradition of political philosophy; here Plato describes the world of human affairs in terms of shadows and darkness, and instructs those who aspire to truth to turn away from it in favor of the "clear sky of eternal ideas." This metaphysical hierarchy, *theôria* is placed above *praxis* and *epistêmê* over mere *doxa*. The realm of action and appearance (including the political) is subordinated to and becomes instrumental for the ends of the Ideas as revealed to the philosopher who lives the *bios theôretikos*. In *The Human Condition* and subsequent works, the task Arendt set herself is to save action and appearance, and with it the common life of the political and the values of opinion, from the depredations of the philosophers. By systematically elaborating what this *vita activa* might be said to entail, she hopes to reinstate the life of public and political action to apex of human goods and goals.

**a. The *Vita Activa*: Labor, Work and Action**

In *The Human Condition* Arendt argues for a tripartite division between the human activities of labor, work, and action. Moreover, she arranges these activities in an ascending hierarchy of importance, and identifies the overturning of this hierarchy as central to the eclipse of political freedom and responsibility which, for her, has come to characterize the modern age.

**i. Labor: Humanity as *Animal Laborans***

Labor is that activity which corresponds to the biological processes and necessities of human existence, the practices which are necessary for the maintenance of life itself. Labor is distinguished by its never-ending character; it creates nothing of permanence, its efforts are quickly consumed, and must therefore be perpetually renewed so as to sustain life. In this aspect of its existence humanity is closest to the animals and so, in a significant sense, the least human ("What men [sic] share with all other forms of animal life was not considered to be human"). Indeed, Arendt refers to humanity in this mode as *animal laborans*. Because the activity of labor is commanded by necessity, the human being as laborer is the equivalent of the slave; labor is characterized by unfreedom. Arendt argues that it is precisely the recognition of labor as contrary to freedom, and thus to what is distinctively human, which underlay the institution of slavery amongst the ancient Greeks; it was the attempt to exclude labor from the conditions of human life. In view of this characterization of labor, it is unsurprising that Arendt is highly critical of Marx's elevation of *animal laborans* to a position of primacy in his vision of the highest ends of human existence. Drawing on the Aristotelian distinction of the *oikos* (the private realm of the household) from the *polis* (the public realm of the political community), Arendt argues that matters of labor, economy and the like properly belong to the former, not the latter. The emergence of necessary labor , the private concerns of the *oikos*, into the public sphere (what Arendt calls "the rise of the social") has for her the effect of destroying the properly political by subordinating the public realm of human freedom to the concerns mere animal necessity. The prioritization of the economic which has attended the rise of capitalism has for Arendt all but eclipsed the possibilities of meaningful political agency and the pursuit of higher ends which should be the proper concern of public life.

**ii. Work: Humanity as *Homo Faber***

If labor relates to the natural and biologically necessitated dimension of human existence, then work is "the activity which corresponds to the unnaturalness of human existence, which is not embedded in, and whose mortality is not compensated by, the species' ever-recurring life-cycle." Work (as both *technê* and*poiesis*) corresponds to the fabrication of an *artificial* world of things, artifactual constructions which endure temporally beyond the act of creation itself. Work thus creates a world distinct from anything given in nature, a world distinguished by its durability, its semi-permanence and relative independence from the individual actors and acts which call it into being. Humanity in this mode of its activity Arendt names *homo faber*; he/she is the builder of walls (both physical and cultural) which divide the human realm from that of nature and provide a stable context (a "common world") of spaces and institutions within which human life can unfold. *Homo faber*'s typical representatives are the builder, the architect, the craftsperson, the artist and the legislator, as they create the public world both physically and institutionally by constructing buildings and making laws.

It should be clear that work stands in clear distinction from labor in a number of ways. Firstly, whereas labor is bound to the demands of animality, biology and nature, work violates the realm of nature by shaping and transforming it according to the plans and needs of humans; this makes work a distinctly human (i.e. non-animal) activity. Secondly, because work is governed by human ends and intentions it is under humans' sovereignty and control, it exhibits a certain quality of freedom, unlike labor which is subject to nature and necessity. Thirdly, whereas labor is concerned with satisfying the individual's life-needs and so remains essentially a private affair, work is inherently *public*; it creates an objective and common world which both stands between humans and unites them. While work *is not* the mode of human activity which corresponds to politics, its fabrications are nonetheless the preconditions for the existence of a political community. The common world of institutions and spaces that work creates furnish the arena in which citizens may come together as members of that shared world to engage in political activity. In Arendt's critique of modernity the world created by *homo faber* is threatened with extinction by the aforementioned "rise of the social." The activity of labor and the consumption of its fruits, which have come to dominate the public sphere, cannot furnish a common world within which humans might pursue their higher ends. Labor and its effects are inherently impermanent and perishable, exhausted as they are consumed, and so do not possess the qualities of quasi-permanence which are necessary for a shared environment and common heritage which endures between people and across time. In industrial modernity "all the values characteristic of the world of fabrication - permanence, stability, durability...are sacrificed in favor of the values of life, productivity and abundance." The rise of *animal laborans* threatens the extinction of *homo faber*, and with it comes the passing of those worldly conditions which make a community's collective and public life possible (what Arendt refers to as "world alienation").

**iii. Action: Humanity as *Zoon Politikon***

So, we have the activity of labor which meets the needs that are essential for the maintenance of humanities physical existence, but by virtue of its necessary quality occupies the lowest rung on the hierarchy of the *vita activa*. Then we have work, which is a distinctly human (i.e. non-animal) activity which fabricates the enduring, public and common world of our collective existence. However, Arendt is at great pains to establish that the activity of *homo faber* *does not* equate with the realm of human freedom and so cannot occupy the privileged apex of the human condition. For work is still subject to a certain kind of necessity, that which arises from its essentially *instrumental* character. As *technê* and*poiesis* the act is dictated by and subordinated to ends and goals outside itself; work is essentially a*means* to achieve the thing which is to be fabricated (be it a work of art, a building or a structure of legal relations) and so stands in a relation of mere purposiveness to that end. (Again it is Plato who stands accused of the instrumentalization of action, of its conflation with fabrication and subordination to an external teleology as prescribed by his metaphysical system). For Arendt, the activity of work cannot be fully free insofar as it is not an end in itself, but is determined by prior causes and articulated ends. The quality of freedom in the world of appearances (which for Arendt is the *sine qua non* of politics) is to be found elsewhere in the *vita activa*, namely with the activity of action proper.

The fundamental defining quality of action is its ineliminable freedom, its status as an end in itself and so as subordinate to nothing outside itself. Arendt argues that it is a mistake to take freedom to be primarily an inner, contemplative or private phenomenon, for it is in fact active, worldly and public. Our sense of an inner freedom is derivative upon first having experienced "a condition of being free as a tangible worldly reality. We first become aware of freedom or its opposite in our intercourse with others, not in the intercourse with ourselves." In defining action as freedom, and freedom as action, we can see the decisive influence of Augustine upon Arendt's thought. From Augustine's political philosophy she takes the theme of human action as *beginning*:

To act, in its most general sense, means to take initiative, to begin (as the Greek word *archein*, 'to begin,' 'to lead,' and eventually 'to rule' indicates), to set something in motion. Because they are *initium*, newcomers and beginners by virtue of birth, men take initiative, are prompted into action.

And further, that freedom is to be seen:

as a character of human existence in the world. Man does not so much possess freedom as he, or better his coming into the world, is equated with the appearance of freedom in the universe; man is free because he is a beginning...

In short, humanity represents/articulates/embodies the faculty of beginning. It follows from this equation of freedom, action and beginning that freedom is "an accessory of doing and acting;" "Men *are* free...as long as they act, neither before nor after; for to *be* free and to act are the same." This capacity for initiation gives actions the character of singularity and uniqueness, as "it is in the nature of beginning that something new is started which cannot be expected from whatever happened before." So, intrinsic to the human capacity for action is the introduction of genuine novelty, the unexpected, unanticipated and unpredictable into the world:

The new always happens against the overwhelming odds of statistical laws and their probability, which for all practical, everyday purposes amounts to certainty; the new therefore always appears in the guise of a miracle.

This "miraculous," initiatory quality distinguishes genuine action from mere behavior i.e. from conduct which has an habituated, regulated, automated character; behavior falls under the determinations of*process*, is thoroughly conditioned by causal antecedents, and so is essentially unfree. The definition of human action in terms of freedom and novelty places it outside the realm of necessity or predictability. Herein lies the basis of Arendt's quarrel with Hegel and Marx, for to define politics or the unfolding of history in terms of any teleology or immanent or objective process is to deny what is central to authentic human action, namely, its capacity to initiate the wholly new, unanticipated, unexpected, unconditioned by the laws of cause and effect.

It has been argued that Arendt is a political existentialist who, in seeking the greatest possible autonomy for action, falls into the danger of aestheticising action and advocating decisionism. Yet political existentialism lays great stress on *individual will* and on *decision* as "an act of existential choice unconstrained by principles or norms." In contradistinction, Arendt's theory holds that actions cannot be justified for their own sake, but only in light of their public recognition and the shared rules of a political community. For Arendt, action is a *public* category, a worldly practice that is experienced in our intercourse with others, and so is a practice that "both presupposes and can be actualized only in a human polity." As Arendt puts it:

Action, the only activity that goes on directly between men...corresponds to the human condition of plurality, to the fact that men, not Man, live on the earth and inhabit the world. While all aspects of the human condition are somehow related to politics, this plurality is specifically *the* condition - not only the*conditio sine qua non*, but the *conditio per quam* - of all political life .

Another way of understanding the importance of publicity and plurality for action is to appreciate that action would be meaningless unless there were others present to see it and so give meaning to it. The meaning of the action and the identity of the actor can only be established in the context of human plurality, the presence others sufficiently like ourselves both to understand us and recognize the uniqueness of ourselves and our acts. This communicative and disclosive quality of action is clear in the way that Arendt connects action most centrally to *speech*. It is through action as speech that individuals come to disclose their distinctive identity: "Action is the public disclosure of the agent in the speech deed." Action of this character requires a public space in which it can be realized, a context in which individuals can encounter one another as members of a community. For this space, as for much else, Arendt turns to the ancients, holding up the Athenian *polis* as the model for such a space of communicative and disclosive speech deeds. Such action is for Arendt synonymous with the political; politics is the ongoing activity of citizens coming together so as to exercise their capacity for agency, to conduct their lives together by means of free speech and persuasion. Politics and the exercise of freedom-as-action are one and the same:

π…freedom...is actually the reason that men live together in political organisations at all. Without it, political life as such would be meaningless. The *raison d'être* of politics is freedom, and its field of experience is action.