

12.0 WORK/LABOUR (HANNAH ARENDT)

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ABSTRACT

Hannah Arendt (1906-1975) was a German-born American political philosopher whose work explored the human condition, totalitarianism and the nature of freedom. Arendt's landmark texts include *The Human Condition* (1958) and *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1973) which explore human destruction "evil" (anti-Semitism and Stalinism) and how politics is mobilised in particular ways to support "evil" or rail against it. Arendt was able to leave Germany during the holocaust and the horrors of the horrors of war and political oppression directed her thought to explaining the darkness of the human condition. Arendt asks important questions about the human experience – are human beings capable of goodness? Can humans build political systems that are not usurped by totalitarian or oppressive regimes? How and in what ways which technology and capitalism change what it means to be human? For REELER we are also want to explore fears and hope of our interlocutors, and bring their political engagement in our work through mini publics.

12.1 Opening

The purpose of this report is to give an introduction to Arendt's own terms, ones which might be useful for the REELER project. In terms of relevance to the REELER project, *The Human Condition* offers ways in which we may use to make sense on how robots are changing the work, relationships, politics, economics and democracy. Democracy, freedom and technology are interrelated categories. Will robots and AI system lead to less freedom? Or less democracy? To what extent should technologies be permitted to collect data on users and feed their data back to companies? Arendt is set with the humanist tradition, and while sees the contradictions of modernity, does not reject humanism, but remains a fierce defender of individual freedom.

12.2 Methodology

Arendt's impact on political philosophy over the last 60 years is demonstrated by the extraordinary richness of her philosophy and her prolific publication record. While Arendt deals with many topics, I have decided to focus on her concept of *vita activa* which is articulated in the *Human Condition*. *Vita activa* translates as an *active life* and touches on the nature of ontology and the nature of being human. The methodology is a book review of the *Human Condition*.

12.3 Vita Activa

The term *vita activa* is drawn from Western philosophical tradition, pointing to the trial of Socrates and the conflict between the philosopher and the *polis* (p. 12). The *polis* is the public city state of ancient Greece, a place enjoyed by philosophers who contemplated the meaning of existence. By drawing on the *polis*, Arendt is tracing the earliest origins of modern democracy but more importantly a place for the discussion of human affairs 'stressing the action, *praxis*, needed to establish and sustain it' (p. 13).

The *vita activa* is a space where contemplation of existence can take place. It is a unique space that was, in ancient Greek, separated from labor and work activities were taken done by human beings held in bondage as slaves. For example, Arendt points Aristotle who put slaves and barbarians 'outside the polis...[as they were deprived] of a way of life in which speech and only speech made sense and where the central concern of all citizens was to talk with each other' (p. 27). Arendt then does not problematize power structures that limit other humans by categorising them as other. Arendt however charts this ancient meaning of the *vita activa*, but proposes her own way of making sense of it:

‘With the term *vita activa*, I propose to designate three fundamental human activities: labor, work, and action. They are fundamental because each corresponds to one of the basic conditions under which life on earth has been given to man’ (p. 7).

She continues, ‘vita active, human life in so far as it is actively engaged in doing something, is already rooted in a world of men and man-made things which it never leaves or altogether transcends’ (p.22). A central theme in her work is the concept of social humans, how human beings must live and work together, producing artefacts that in turn reshape how humans engage with their world and each other. The industrial revolution, the science revolution and the technological revolution changed forever the lives and ontological experience of human beings. And robots and AI are predicted to be the next revolution to transform human experience, between humans and outside of them in their relationships with humanmade artefacts. ‘All human activities are conditioned by the fact that men live together, but it only action that never ben imagined outside the society of men’ (p.22). Arendt’s stress on interdependence of human beings is a topic to explore in our REELER project. What does it mean to be a social being when technology has already transformed our meanings through social networking technologies? What about the view that humans can have substitute relationships with robots and AI avatars, can humanmade artefacts take on roles that Arendt propose are exclusively human?

12.3 Labour

Integral to the *vita activa* is the concept of labour which is a core concept in Arendt’s work where ‘Karl Marx will be criticised’ (p. 70). For Arendt, labour corresponding to the natural processes of the human body as a biological entity that is in need of nourishment, and will eventually decay. Labour cannot be an isolated activity, though it is something that is experienced by each person, it is social, a shared endeavour rooted in social relations. Arendt’s use of the term ‘labour’ to describe biological processes is at odds with the use of the term in the work of Marx’s *Capital* (1867), but Arendt draw on a use of the term that is a meaning preserved in many European languages she writes:

Against this scarcity of historical evidence, however, stands one very articulate and obstinate testimony, namely, the simple fact that every European language, ancient and modern, contains two etymologically unrelated words for what we have come to think of as the same activity [work and labour] and retains them in the face of their persistent synonymous usage’ (p. 80).

The body is integral to the concept of labour, which parts of the body labour? Can hands labour without the mind? Can a mind labour without the hands? Can robots labour if they do not have life? According to Arendt, ‘contempt for labouring, originally [arose] out of a passionate striving for freedom from necessity’ (p.81). This concept of labour as tied to human origins, reproduction challenges the Marxian concept of the notion of labour as something outside and separate to the human. Arendt’s flips the terms of Marx into their opposites. Marx, believed the reproduction of self (labour in Arendt’s frame) was subsumed under the conditions of capitalism. Labour in this reading by Arendt, are products of human ‘metabolism with nature, [and] do not stay in the world long enough to become a part of it, and the labouring activity itself, concentrated exclusively on life and its maintenance, is oblivious of the world to the point of *worldlessness*’ (my emphasis p. 118). This connection with nature is described by analogy to the life of animals the ‘worldlessness of the *animal laborans*’ (p. 118).

12.4 Work

The concept of work for Arendt takes on a radically different meaning from everyday conceptions of work writing:

‘Work is the activity which corresponds to the unnaturalness of human existence, which is not imbedded in, and whose mortality is not compensated by, the species’ ever-recurring life cycle.

Work provides an "artificial" world of things, distinctly different from all natural surroundings. Within its borders each individual life is housed, while this world itself is meant to outlast and transcend them all. The human condition of work is worldliness' (p. 2).

This world of things stands against the human, they are separate from the human. Drawing on the Heraclitean saying 'the same man can never enter the same stream' (p. 137), Arendt's proposes a unique way of proposing the world of things as the world of objectivity – that 'stands against' proposing that humans retrieve their 'sameness, that is, their identity, by being related to the same chair and the same table. In other words, against the subjectivity of men stands the objectivity of the man-made world...without a world between men and nature, there is eternal movement, but no objectivity' (p. 137). If the labour approximates to *animal laborans* (p. 118), work approximates to *homo faber*, the creation of the human artifice (p. 139).

Arendt cautions between dissolving the distinctions between labour and work 'most work in the modern world' she writes 'is performed in the mode of labour, so that the worker, even if wanted to, could not "labor for his work rather than for himself" (p. 140).

We will return to the concept of work in the REELER project, particularly asking how labour and work can be different kinds of activities organised around different human processes. To conclude this section of work with reference to Arendt's comments on tools, instruments and machines the following is worthy of note. Arendt was less concerned than Marx about the way in which machines controlled human behaviour. Arendt proposes this contrast between the tool, which is controlled by a human and a machine, which controls a human is problematic. But Arendt was concerned that the 'laborer serves them, that he adjust the natural rhythm of his body to their mechanical movement. This, certainly, does not imply that men as such adjust to or become the servants of their machines; but it does mean that, as long as the work at the machines last, the mechanical process has replaced the rhythm of the human body...Even the most primitive machine guides the body's labour and eventually replaces it altogether (p. 147). The body is adapts to the machine's rhythms during human interaction, but as Arendt says, if it becomes a mode of interaction, the body of the human will change.

We are concerned too in REELER how humans use their bodies to interact with robots, and to what extent human bodies are changed by this interaction?

12.5 Action (and plurality)

For Arendt, human plurality the 'activity that goes on directly between men without the intermediary of things or matter, corresponds to the **human condition of plurality**, to the fact that men, not Man, live on the earth and inhabit the world' (p.3). Action is a basic condition of action and speech and equality and distinction (175). Equality between humans, in Arendt's view, make it possible to understand and be understood. Equality and distinction are interrelated. If 'men were not distinct,' writes Arendt, each human being distinguished from any other who is, was, or will ever be, they would need neither speech or action to make themselves understood' (p. 175-176).

Action or plurality could be understood in part, as interpersonal, those relations that are unique to humans, that are made possible through speech, language and equality (refer to Arendt's earlier observation that in the time of Aristotle in ancient Greece that slaves had not speech as citizens and therefore were not recognised).

As roboticists try to produce robots that use language, it is appropriate to use terms such as speech and language when describing the acts of the machines? It is not that the machine is not performing the speech and language, but that robotic machines have no sense of labour, nor work in Arendt's sense. Robotics machines do not reproduce their metabolism in tune with nature, nor do they produce objects in the world in which they can contrast their subjectivity. Arendt continues 'In acting and

speaking, men show who they are, reveal actively their unique personal identities and thus make their appearance in the human world, while their physical identities appear without any activity of their own in the unique shape of the body and the sound of the voice' (p. 179). Arendt describes this as 'disclosure' of 'who' rather than 'what' denoting the revelatory quality of speech 'with others' (p. 180).

12.6 Conclusion

Hannah Arendt's *The Human Condition* is an original perspective and analysis on what it means to be human. Her book is a deeply optimistic book about *vita activa*, a life full of activity in plurality with other humans. It is unashamedly committed to the Western humanist tradition. As Arendt's dialogues with Marx on the failings of his concepts of labour, it brings to mind how powerful ideas, developed by academics, can be in the ways we make sense of human existence, and also the dangerous avenues that humanity can take through hate, and an abuse of power. For REELER, this review of *The Human Condition* is our introduction to the work of Arendt, and inspired by her spirit to be confident about the human condition, in a world where there is sometimes more faith put into humanmade mechanical artefacts than other human beings.

References

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