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Chapter 2

THE HUMAN CONDITION AND THE THEORY OF ACTION

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Action and Praxis

The sociological approach to action

An act is something undertaken (1) by an *actor*, (2) oriented to a specific future *end*, (3) in a *situation* that channels how this end can be reached; and (4) in a *normative* environment constraining how these are combined. Or so wrote Talcott Parsons ([1949] 1968). This conception of action still seems to be the fundamental one assumed in most sociological work, even much American theory, despite it being the focus of vigorous attack from the most important American school of social thought, the pragmatists.

Still, a revolt against this conception began to pick up steam in the early 1970s, mostly originating in anthropology (see Ortner 1984), though — significantly, as I will make clear in closing — preceded by political philosopher Michael Oakeshott (1962, 62). In American sociology, it was Bourdieu who first arrived, like an explorer from a foreign land, with this alternative conception as cargo ([1972] 1977). Yet as Bourdieu's visibility grew, the crusty barnacles of traditional action theory began covering the hull of the vessel he had come on — certainly this is true of his reception in the United States, in which Bourdieu became little more than a rational choice theorist for agents with a multiple personality disorder. Field theory devolved into the implicit claim that there were different arenas of striving, each with a potentially independent preference structure.¹

It is for this reason that Arendt's work may be so important for the social sciences, which have largely lapsed back into traditional action theories, not even understanding what the alternative might be. While one could attempt to recreate such a theory of practice from the works of John Dewey, his writing often lacks the painterly qualities necessary to *show*, and not merely *tell*, what

this other vision of action might be (e.g., [1922] 1930). *The Human Condition* is a remarkable work of conceptual history and critique, one that questions assumptions that sociology has deemed unquestionable, and, in particular, one that offers a deeper understanding of the nature of politics than is to be found among any of our theorists. To be able to even appreciate what Arendt was trying to do, we must first free ourselves from the assumption that action just is as Parsons defined it. To do this, I briefly summarize Aristotle's approach to action, to which Arendt was to return.

Aristotle's conception

We may recall that to Aristotle (*Politics* [Pol] 1280b5²), the city-state is connected with the pursuit of *virtue*. But we often interpret this in the Victorian sense in which we have learned to associate *virtue* (originally from the Latin for *manly*) with sanctimonious restraint (of which the paradigm is virginity, especially a woman's *lack* of contact with a man). For Aristotle, virtue [*arête*] was a quality of something, specifically, its excellence (*Nicomachean Ethics* [NE] 1106a15). The question he considered crucial is how free men can carry out noble actions, actions *worthy* of a free man (Pol 1332a10).

What *should* one be doing? What should be the ends of our actions? Since Aristotle accepted that some ends were only intermediaries, means to other ends, we can find the good by pursuing such chains of ends to one that is terminal (NE 1049a15; 1097a20). When we do this, we find that happiness and self-sufficiency (which turn out to be equivalent) are terminals. Thus the happiness of a "serious person" (an excellent one) is the final end. But — for reasons that Arendt will focus on — this turns out to require the form of a *polis*, a city-state. Answering the question of ethics requires posing the question of political science.³

Aristotle's political science begins from the assumption that some by birth are fit to rule, others to be ruled (Pol 1254a20). This fitness is literally embodied, as one can see the upright posture of a natural master in contrast to the hunched servility of the slave (Pol 1245b25). There are, however, some who are free, at least legally, yet seem unfit to be placed in a position of rule; inversely, there are also some who technically are (at any one time) ruled, but seem to have all the excellence of the natural ruler (Pol 1255b20). We cannot simply take the ruler/ruled distinction from what we see before us. What, then, is the most fundamental way of according to each the political position he deserves?

Aristotle made a distinction between *poiesis* (making) and *praxis* (action) (also see *Metaphysics* 1064a10). A craftsman, like a slave, must be oriented to *making* things, as both produce necessities for others to live off of (Pol 1278a). For this reason, the craftsman can never be virtuous. Why? Because making

is inherently oriented to *something else* as the end. Work in this sense is inherently contaminating, not because it identifies the subaltern as such (though this is true: Pol 1337b1, b20; 1338a1, b2), but because it *subordinates the act to the end*. In sum, understanding the craft of constituting a political community for Aristotle required understanding the natures of the men who composed it, and these were, in his mind, determined largely by class relations. For these three classes — the free man, the vulgar craftsman and the slave — were, for Aristotle, indicative of three types of political position, and so too, we shall see, for Arendt.

Aristotle's logic implies that the excellence of anything comes from it being an end in itself, and not a means to an end. While the "arts," oriented to the *product*, are attentive to the act only as means (and hence an ugly action that produces a beautiful object is to be preferred to a noble action that produces nothing at all), the virtuous act is virtuous by nature of *how* it is done. In particular, it must be done deliberately yet with the graceful steadiness that comes from practice (NE 1105b; 1178a35). This sort of excellence, argued Aristotle, can be achieved only through habit (NE 1103a15; 1103a25).

Action and politics

All interesting, but what is the relevance for the issue of political action? Aristotle was always attentive to the necessary incompleteness of any formal deductive system (impressive, given that he was also basically the founder of logic as we know it) (*Posterior Analytics* 100b12). This had obvious implications for political life — we cannot argue that the "laws" should be put above men, because the laws, as universal, cannot deal with particularities (Pol 1286a5). It is *men* who must determine how the laws are applied to any particularity, and this requires what Aristotle called "practical reason" [*nous praktikos*, later replaced with *phronesis*]. It is this practical sense that allows us to know what sort of situation we have, and to be able to apply the spirit of the law when the letter does not serve (Pol 1286a10; 1289a11; NE 1140a25-31; 1144a1,9; *Eudemian Ethics* [EE] 1247a14).

This sort of practical wisdom is only acquired through experience (though a free man can gain it by *being ruled*, and then learn how to rule *others*) (Pol 1277b). Those who think that legislation can be *taught* to others on the basis of a priori considerations (the examples Aristotle gives are only unnamed "sophists," but Plato's Socrates fits the bill) make themselves ridiculous. It is the actual political actors who are the experts, and they teach us through their action (NE 1180b30; 1181a1; 1181a15).

In sum, it is not that we act "in order to" serve the collective good, for a city-state itself exists for the purposes of making possible the noble act (Pol

1281a5). Such action requires a sort of confident, practiced judgment, a practical wisdom, one that is “acquainted with the particulars: it is bound up with action, and action concerns the particulars” (*NE* 1141b15). Thus this sort of practical wisdom that comes from habit was tied to the *graceful* execution that comes from embodiment; it is notable that despite the fact that musicianship was associated with *serviæ*, Aristotle still appealed to kithara-playing as a fundamental metaphor for political action.

This conception was largely lost; it is significant that by the time of Machiavelli (e.g., [1532] 1998, 100), “prudence” (which had been the Latin translation of *phronesis*) became associated not with habit but with its opposite, the capacity to change tack as the winds of fortune shifted. While this did denote a capacity to respond to the particularities of the situation, it has more connotations of dependence on the given, and less the confidence of the skilled master. This acceptance of the given informed the core notions of political action in sociology. Most famously, Weber had provided what seemed to be an exclusive and exhaustive partition of ethical ways of acting politically — one could either be oriented toward a valued *goal*, with one’s actions all only means to this goal, or the acts could be ends in themselves — but then one must *renounce* the project of politics and go off and play Saint Francis, for one was *irresponsible* ([1918] 1946). These conceptions of politics and action, Arendt believed, were ill thought out, and had led to dreadful consequences.

Arendt’s Projects

Return to the Greeks and to Kant

As Hannah Arendt was later to tell it, the word on the streets was that there was a young professor at Marburg who had reconnected with ancient tradition: “Thinking has come to life again; the cultural treasures of the past, believed to be dead, are being made to speak” (quoted in Young-Bruhl 1982, 49). This was, of course, Martin Heidegger, and while Arendt clearly was influenced by her advisor, Karl Jaspers (taking from him not only the conviction that there could be a blending of *Existenz* philosophy and Kantianism, but also a penchant for working in triads), she was equally energized by Heidegger’s fresh approach to the ancients. (While her dissertation was on Augustine, this was a common choice for the new phenomenological thinkers, as his *Confessions* was a mine from which insights on the nature of temporality could be found.)

Further, she thought that this need for a re-appreciation of the Greek conceptions relevant for what became the keynote in a rich political philosophy, namely the loss of judgment she believed characteristic of twentieth-century

thought. The starkest evidence in support of such a charge was the rise of Nazism. Somehow, confronted with a choice that should have been clear, many Europeans (including Heidegger himself) went the wrong way. Interestingly, here Arendt did not turn to Aristotle and attempt to rework his ideas of choice or practical reason. Instead, she stuck with the fundamental partition of the faculties associated with Kant, and her final major project, *The Life of the Mind*, was to be a set of three works corresponding to the three main faculties Kant identified (thinking, willing and judging). Unfortunately, Arendt died before beginning the third volume (the title page being in her typewriter; while she had confidently forecasted a straightforward treatment, I suspect that she would have found this task far more puzzling than she originally anticipated).

Despite this focus on the Kantian faculty of judgment, often treated with suspicion by phenomenologists as representing the violent imposition of formal reasoning into the previously inviolate wholeness of experience,⁴ — Arendt’s treatment was based in her understanding of classical Greek action. Discussing the case of Anton Schmidt, a German sergeant who, during the Holocaust, helped Jewish partisans (and not for money) for months before he was executed, Arendt strongly disagreed with those who argued (from a consequentialist perspective) that such resistances, as historically ineffectual, were meaningless (1964a, 232f). In opposition, she emphasized that “One man will always be left alive to tell the story.” The end of action, then, is not its *consequence* — for the consequences of any action are unpredictable and all things are tangled. Rather, it is *history* (also 1951a, 59f).⁵

The subject

This provides some of the context of *The Human Condition* (henceforward *THC*); all references are to this work unless otherwise noted), namely Arendt’s general attempt to rethink the basic categories by which we understand ourselves, and political action in particular. More specifically, the book actually began as an attempted engagement with the thought of Marx, itself a spin-off from a previous desire to examine the Soviet system, given short shrift in her recently published *Origins of Totalitarianism* (Pitkin 1998, 98; also see 10, 16). Rather than grapple with Marx’s thought, Arendt ended up dealing with what she believed to be the underlying notions used by Marx and others.

A word of caution: Arendt’s method is the historical reanalysis of core concepts. Specialists do not always agree with her interpretations. Here I treat Arendt’s thinking in terms of its original contributions, and I make no attempt to weigh the accuracy of her claims when I repeat them. Further, like many creative intellectual historians (but unlike most social scientists), Arendt uses an analysis of developments in ideas to make strong implications as to

broader, parallel changes in sociohistorical patterns, an assumption I will not question here.

In any case, what *is* the human condition? In a way, it has been well understood from time immemorial – it is mortality. This means that when we ask “what are the ends of your action?” and attempt, like Aristotle, to pursue this chain to its ultimate conclusion, the only real answer is death. (See, for example, her initial interpretation of Augustine [Arendt (1929) 1996, 13].) Yet Arendt was also considering the human condition circa 1958 – a world of increasing technological rationality, scientific achievement, nuclear threat and uncertain politics. She hoped that by clarifying our understanding of the fundamental categories of the comprehension of human existence – even, if necessary, by returning to Aristotle – we could better understand the future and our capacity to control our own ends. “What I propose, therefore, is very simple: it is nothing more than to think what we are doing” (5). But most important, what Arendt (9) means by “the human condition” is the capacity of human beings to condition themselves on a world that they transform. Our existence in the world – if indeed we are to *have* a world – is not independent of the nature of our activity.

Here I only give a partial resume of *THC*, and do not follow its own presentation (and somewhat curious though effective organization), but rather emphasize what seem to be the most noteworthy points that she makes about the nature of action, the social, the political and science.

Action, Labor and Work

What is action?

The core of *THC* is – characteristically for Arendt – a trichotomy, three different ways of understanding human activity, which she calls the *vita activa* (the term used in medieval philosophy as the standard translation of the Aristotelian *bios politikos*). The three ways of understanding activity Arendt calls *action*, *fabrication* or *work*, and *labor*. Arendt sees these as temporally arranged in this order; the historical cut-points between action and fabrication being marked with Plato, and that between fabrication and labor marked with Marx (12). Because Arendt’s understanding of action is quite different from that of most contemporary social thinkers, I first give attention to what she means by the term, and then explore the triadic structure.⁶

Arendt’s fundamental conception of action is the one we saw explicated by Aristotle, despite the fact that she is really pursuing *earlier* Greek conceptions. And this is because there is a way in which Aristotle’s conception of politics was “pre-Socratic,” in that he shed away from some of the stronger aspects of the Socratic/Platonic conception of the relation between the city-state and

the good, which, for Plato, is defined not by the *polis* but by reason itself, and which therefore pits a new construction of the “community” (as reached by the philosopher) against the notion of political action. The question is who is to be inside of whom – the free man, or reason? Even more, as we shall see Arendt argue, Plato took as his core metaphor the model of *fabrication*, and not that of *action*.

What is action? In Arendt’s understanding, it is paradigmatically *speech*, and the speech of *speeches* – public declarations to influence others. While Arendt often uses the pairing of *speech* and *deed*, it is clear that the former is more fundamental, since speech without deed is still action, while the reverse is not true. And this is because action, whether verbal or not, is a kind of statement – specifically, it is an answer to the question “Who are you?” (178).⁷

To return: Aristotle considered three plausible forms of life available to the free – self-gratification, political action and philosophy (*EE* 1215a35, I.5; *NE* 1095b17; I.5; cf. Arendt *THC* 12). Unlike Plato, who unequivocally saw only the life of contemplation as truly excellent (e.g., *Republic*, 500c), Aristotle seems to have had some difficulty banishing earlier ideas that it is the life of action that is highest for man, though he did eventually come around. Arendt implicitly sides with a pre-Socratic understanding of the nature of action – assumed by them, even if not by Arendt, to be the most excellent of the options – though elaborating it in Aristotelian terms. In particular, she linked action to his use of *energeia* (actuality), for action is not merely a means to something else; indeed, true action leaves no completed work behind (206). This is of course an extreme vision (ideal typical, we might say), but understanding it is vital for reproducing Arendt’s thought.

Action and consequences

Arendt strongly endorses Aristotle’s conception that action is not about the ends, but the action itself. Indeed, Arendt is convinced that there is something fundamentally insane about means-end thinking: for one thing, she believes that it logically implies not only that “the” end justifies the means, but also that this in turn implies that *anything* is acceptable (229).⁸ Such thinking not only tends toward irresponsible extremism, but is laughable given the actual complexity of the results of action. “The process of a single deed can quite literally endure throughout time until mankind itself has come to an end” (233).

Arendt does not deny that action is oriented to accomplishing things. But she sees this as somewhat different from the idea of calculable consequences, since action, unlike work, lacks a predictable end making such consequentialism plausible; we are too dependent on the responses of others (144). Hence

action's excellence is separable from its outcome. Consider Pericles making his celebrated funeral oration to the Athenians. It was intended to strengthen the resolve of the listeners to pursue their war with Sparta (as well as to honor the dead). Suppose that Pericles calculated that he would actually better inspire the audience if he was inarticulate, or, indeed, if he displayed cowardice himself, provoking his audience to angrily determine to show him true courage. Such thinking would be completely foreign to the Greek idea of virtue and excellence.⁹

Action not only transcends determination by ends, but it also, unlike regular behavior, transcends conventional moral standards (which does not mean that it is free from *any* standards). This is because, Arendt insists, to the Greeks political action is by definition extraordinary (205); as each act is unique, it (like an artwork in later aesthetics) must bring within it its own standards of evaluation.¹⁰

For Arendt, the uniqueness of action is key — action is a *start*, the beginning of something new. Our running toward death would carry everything human to destruction and ruin “if it were not for the faculty of interrupting it and beginning something new, a faculty which is inherent in action like an ever-present reminder that men, though they must die, are not born in order to die but in order to begin” (246).

Indeed, Arendt (189) emphasizes that both in Greek and in Latin there were originally *two* words for what we might now call action, one for *initiating* (*archein/agerere*) and another for *completing* (*prattein/gereve*). In both cases, the former became assimilated to political rule and the latter became the more generic term for action. As it is the former that is characteristic of free men (Arendt 1951a, 166f), any political subjection forces its expropriation from the subject. Thus although Arendt follows later thought and uses *praxis* (from *prattein*) to indicate this meaning of action, her core vision turns more on this earlier conception of *archein*, as her conception is fundamentally a set of political equals confronting one another in an assembly.

The division

In contrast to this conception of action, Arendt (7) adumbrates two other modes of activity often confused with one another, namely *labor* and *work*. Indeed, *THC* is important for sociologists if only for her clear separation of these two; though few preceding authors had made this a focus, “against this scarcity of historical evidence” for her claims, she points to the “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, and retains them in the face of their persistent synonymous usage” (80).

How can we distinguish the two? “Labor never refers to the finished product, but remains a verbal noun to be classed with the gerund, whereas the product itself is invariably derived from the word for work,” even when the verb form for work has become obsolete (80). In other words, *labor* emphasizes the bodily activity itself. *Work*, oriented to the outcome as opposed to the process, sees the activity as a means to an end, and using *work* as the template for human activity brings with it the dominance of means-ends thinking (143).

To Arendt, these three forms of activity tend to correspond to three different products: labor, to perishables (for example, flour); work, to durables (especially means of production);¹¹ and action, to speech. Further, there is a temporal gradient paralleling these: labor is involved in the continual reproduction of life — once done, it is immediately required again, leading to a general sense of futility, for the process of rebuilding the decaying body anew is like attempting to sweep away the sand from a beach (100). Labor’s temporal orientation is therefore cyclical, as it is oriented to replenishing the body’s needs, while work’s is linear — the accomplishment of a goal through production. For this reason, work has a separation (if also a unification) of plan and execution. Significantly, there are no *work* songs, only labor songs — craftsmen sing *after* work, not during it (145n8). The laborer *prefers* repetitive labor because it requires no mental attention and allows for the compensation of mental freedom; the absentminded worker, in contrast, is a *bad* worker. On the other extreme, the great deed or the great speech is “immortal.” By this, Arendt means two things: first, she appeals to the ancient Greeks’ *senae* that their actions could be immortal. But more important, this immortality is related to the capacity of humans to have a *world*.

Arendt begins from the presumption that each of us, *qua* body, is “subjective” in the sense not of being a subject, but rather in having a solipsistic orientation to experience, akin to the theories of infantile oceanic egocentrism. It is connection with stable things outside ourselves, whether these are things or persons, that leads to objectivity. One of the many important things about the existence of a public sphere is that it is a realm of objectivity, transforming the lives of participants from being the “parallel play” of herd sociality to true objectivity. The public world is where one is exposed to multiple perspectives; only here, then, does one get “reality” (57).

Of course, the public sphere is not the only possible source of a world; we may use *things* instead of *persons*. Human life is “engaged in a constant process of reification,” but to the extent that these things have true *worldliness* — that these things can be situated in a shared substrate for coherent and objective experience — they must *transcend* our own time horizons (96), and only a stable and durable object can “stand against” us as an object (*Gegenstand*). And only thus can we, who make the world that conditions us, have that world be an objective one (in a sense that Simmel would also endorse) (137).

Thus both action and work help produce a world. But labor is inherently subjective, because it is fundamentally about the body – one works with one’s hands, but labors with one’s body (and one acts with speech) (118). A collection of people all *laboring* to meet each day’s needs would be a set of parallel subjectivities, lacking any fixed reference points to anchor the meeting of the minds (136). It is with action that we insert ourselves in the human world, just as with fabrication we enter into relation with the natural world (and, in laboring, into a relation only with our own body) (176).¹²

The outlines of this scheme are given in Table 2.1. Such a conceptual clarification is, I believe, interesting and significant in itself. But Arendt believed, first, that this schema corresponded to a temporal ordering; a change in emphasis that flows down the chart. I will sidestep an evaluation of this claim, though later I return to the key question of the society oriented to labor that Arendt saw as characterizing the twentieth century. Arendt also believed that this adumbration had strong implications for the nature of what we might consider to be the realms of the social and the political – whether these are even understood as such, whether they are imagined to be coterminous and whether one has primacy over the other. I wish to begin with this narrower, but more fruitful, question.

The Social and the Political

The social versus the political

What might be most challenging for the sociologist to accept is Arendt’s steadfast rejection of the “social” as an intrinsic dimension of human life.¹³ Indeed, she finds it a fundamentally distasteful and degrading one. It is, argues Arendt (23), significant that the word “social” is Roman in origin; there is no Greek equivalent. To Plato and Aristotle, there was nothing of *human* significance in the fact that people necessarily live among others; this is also true of animals (24). What was distinctly human, for the Greeks, was the capacity for a life as a citizen, the *bios politikos*. And, as Aristotle emphasized, this meant specifically action (*praxis*) and speech (*lexis*) (25). While the *polis* was, of course, the city-state, to Arendt, it connotes the public sphere in which citizens would debate; she tends to associate it with an open place in which all may be seen by all (like an *agora*; though this brings with it certain problems for Arendt [here see Walsh 2015, 24]). It is only here that, to the Greeks, one could be an individual, for only in the public realm would one show who he really is, most notably by surpassing others (41). Finally, the *bios politikos* is what happens *outside* the household (*oikos*), which is an engine for the local production necessary to satisfy wants (33).

The difficulty for sociologists discussing Arendt is that we will consistently want to use the word *social* to describe action, as it is oriented to interpersonal

Table 2.1 Arendt’s scheme

Activity	Done with	Product	Temporality	Objectivity	Structure	Relation with
Action	Speech	Deeds and Speeches	Immortal	Objective, worldly	End in itself	Others (You)
Work	Hands	Tools	Plato Lasting		Means to end	Material world (It)
Labor	Body	Necessaries, consumables	Marx Instantaneous, circular	Subjective, isolated	Cycle	Self – trapped in body (I)

relations. And this is because we use the word social in two senses that are — at least potentially — associated with contradictory understandings. One understanding is that the realm of the social is that which belongs to *société*; this is (in the French context) a Durkheimian interpretation, one that sees there as being a *whole* of which the individuals are parts. In this sense, the political is resolutely opposed to the social, for reasons that Latour (especially 1999) has made clear.¹¹ Starting with Plato, the conception of the whole is used to delegitimize the freedom of political actors, insisting that there is always a “correct” answer to political questions, and that this answer can be reached only by a new type of thinker with access to a new realm of invisible objects of knowledge beyond the reach of the “man of action,” who is now demoted to the *hoi polloi*.

The other understanding of *social* is that which belongs to the *interpersonal*; this would be (in the French context) the Tardéan interpretation. Here there is no contradiction between the social and the political; the two are the same thing, for, as Tardé emphasized, the interpersonal is the realm of influence, of lines of force proceeding from each and connecting all together in a web. Here there is no supervening realm that can be taken for granted as *sui generis*. Rather, the trans-personal is, at heart, an individual creation, and indeed, this is the key to understanding political action. I will follow Arendt and use “the social” for the first, and use “interpersonal” to refer to the second.

This distinction allows us to free ourselves from the common assumption that “politics,” like “the economy,” is a *subset* of “the social,” simply because it is interpersonal. Historically, both the political realm and the economic realm were recognized long before “the social”; only at the turn of the nineteenth century does this more encompassing understanding of a lawful object of study emerge, and it is increasingly associated with notions of the mass, of statistical regularity and of determination.

Formulaically, we can say that, to Arendt, the political was something that can be envisioned as a realm *in front of us* and *between us*, as we form a circle of interactants. The social, on the other hand, is *behind us* and *encompassing us*, moving us about. One of the most intriguing ambiguities in Arendt’s writing is that it is not clear when she thinks of this “social” as an existing organizational structure possessed of causal powers, and when it is a lens through which humans understand aspects of their lives that may not do justice to their actual capacities. It is, however, certain that Arendt believes that the social has gained ground in *both* senses (also see 1959a, 53). Further, the growth of the social has come at the expense of the political.

Political action

This brings us to the aspect of Arendt’s work that may be most interesting for

any notion of politics at all. (Our sister science of political science, in its own folly, has nearly replaced this entirely with *choice*, which is perhaps even worse.) Arendt gives us a rich sense of the relational nature of political action. It is not simply that “(political) action is interpersonal” in the way a Weberian would imagine (it is oriented to the likely behavior of others). Rather, political action *creates* relations. And this is why the political is the realm of action par excellence; because what we call “politics” is when actors orient themselves to sides. Contrary to Weber’s definition, in which politics “means striving to share power or striving to influence the distribution of power” ([1918] 1946, 78), Arendt’s implicit view is that politics is paradigmatically about convincing others to ally with one. Weber’s approach to politics never shook the Bismarkianism that so molded his generation; you will note that his definition agrees with Clausewitz that war is a subset of politics. In contrast, for Arendt, politics is fundamentally about the existence of a public sphere, and where this has collapsed, there simply are no politics at all (also p. 58).¹²

Further, Arendt has a more sophisticated notion of power than Weber’s typically brutalist idea that it is simply about *getting one’s way* over the opposition of another. Power, in Arendt’s eyes, is a *potential*; it is, she writes (200), the sort of thing that “springs up between men when they act together and vanishes the moment they disperse.”¹⁶ Indeed, she emphasizes that we must take seriously the etymological relationship between “might” and “might” — it is the open-endedness of the possibility that produces power. Power exists in the ensemble of relations, not the muscle of the individual (a notion reemphasized by systems theorists like Parsons and Luhmann).

Thus political action is not so much a species of the genus *action* as its paradigm; it is inherent in politics that it involve the making of novel relations, and there is no action that does not take place in, and orient itself to, a public sphere. Where it exists, this sort of action is not merely “new” in the sense explored earlier; it is necessarily creative and critical in its relation to the rest of the social. Rather than action being the motion of parts of the body social, each neatly arranged in its own nested set of groups (perhaps akin to social organs), action has an inherent tendency to cross boundaries, to connect differences and, in general, to complicate things. The body politic may be set up with attempted boundaries and fences, but action repeatedly cuts across these and brings unpredictability with it (190f). To cite the wise words of Allan Silver, “politics is strange bedfellows.”¹⁷

Freedom and influence

As Barry Barnes has said, though it may seem paradoxical, one of the ways that we can determine that an action is free is to see if we can imagine the

the essence of politics (at least in this Greek conception) is freedom, and freedom in turn is a fundamentally *political* (and not, say, scientific) concept (1951a, 146ff). Yet politics is about convincing others, and convincing other *free* people.¹⁸ It is thus a set of relations *between* (the masters of) households.

Think how different was Plato's conception of how a city-state should be governed – taking as his template for governmental relations the *intra-household* relation of master-slave, Plato was in effect declaring that action should have no part in public affairs (224). Indeed, his very emphasis on the notion of *form (eidos)* betrays that he was attempting to replace action with *making (poiesis)*, since it is (as Plato [*Rep* 601c-d] notes) the craftsman who has a mental understanding of the form of what he is to make. (Thus Arendt sees Plato as initiating the regime of human activity as fabrication as opposed to action, one that comes to an end with Marx and the centrality of labor.) It is the potential for the separation of planning and execution inherent in fabrication (225) that allowed Plato his foot in the door; from there, he attempted to completely separate these, giving planning to one set of persons and execution to another.¹⁹ In contrast, Arendt (220) argued that politics is fundamentally about *plurality* – and any attempt to do away with plurality, no matter in what name this is conducted, is an attempt to do away with the public realm and to destroy politics. And this is what has almost happened.

Although Arendt does not attempt to pinpoint a dominant influence or transition point, it is clear that by the time of the early Christian church, there had been a reversal of the ideational structure used to understand action, whereby what had been outside became seen as internal, and what had been internal became external. Regarding the latter, the very notion of “society” (a “common-wealth,” as it was termed a bit earlier) is one that considers issues once defined as wholly private – those of how the *oikos* must meet its needs – now to be public; the very notion of a science of “political economy” would have seemed contradictory to those who first formulated the notion of a *polis*. On the other hand, the Christian idea of goodness is incompatible with publicity; no one is truly good if his action is done *to be seen* (74). Of course, Christianity promised something else. But to understand the nature of this promise, we must backtrack, and explore Arendt's somewhat pessimistic understanding of human existence.

History and Life

The futility of life

It is important to understand how deep is Arendt's rejection of the conventional neo-Kantian understanding of means and ends, which she reduces – perhaps unjustifiably – to utilitarianism (154). Like Aristotle, she allows that

there may be chains of means and ends, but she finds the idea that there is a justifiable *terminal* end ridiculous. What is the use of happiness? What is the use of use? To her, these questions obviously imply the weakness of any resolution based on a regress of “in order to.” (In contrast, she sees in her conception of action a “for the sake of” that is not of the “in order to” form; this is somewhat like Weber's [1978] distinction between value rational and instrumentally rational action.) The devaluation implicit in treating one thing as merely a means to another spreads like contagion throughout the whole chain of conditionality, leaving the world fundamentally degraded and meaningless (156f). (Note that since it is *work* that is paradigmatically associated with such means-ends orientation, Arendt does not see salvation for humanity in a return to the work ethic.)

The alternative inherent in the philosophy of life – perhaps most clearly expressed by Schopenhauer – is that there is no “why” question to be asked about life. Such questioning is allowing the tail of consciousness to try to wag the dog of life. Life lives, and that is that. This eternal circularity of life, which Arendt associates with labor, seems unsatisfying to her, given that we are creatures that can *think* with intellect, can *reason* with one another in speeches and can, occasionally, *do* great deeds. But to do these we need particular organizations of interpersonal life, in both space and in time. Otherwise, while we may be alive, we do not have “a” life.

Arendt (97) made a distinction between life in the biological and biographical senses, using the Greek terms *zoē* and *bios*. The latter is a linear space between a birth and death, which corresponds to action, as opposed to the mere life of circular labor. Without ignoring the appeals of the philosophy of life, when push comes to shove, she finds it merely making the best of a bad situation – our mortality, an undoing of all we are and have done, and a return to dust. But there is, she thinks, another option.

The polis and history

The significance of the polis to the Greeks, wrote Arendt, is that it is that interpersonal formation that allows one's actions and speeches to be remembered (197f; cf. Aristotle *Pol* 1281a5). It is a place where we *appear* to one another, and where appearance and reality by definition coincide, for we *are* our public actions.²⁰ Yet it is not simply that the Greeks wanted to be esteemed by their peers. They wanted to be *immortal*.

For the Greeks, public life was a guarantee against the futility of individual life, where there was no permanence (and no “objectivity” in Arendt's sense) (56). Of course, the permanence comes only with *memory*, and hence, it is history (even if only in the informal sense of stories being retold) that leads to

this preservation of what is most important in our lives. The Greek idea of *eudaimonia*, sometimes translated “blessed happiness,” was something quite different from either or both of these (happiness or blessedness); rather, it meant “to have lived well,” and to say that only the dead have *eudaimonia* is not to curse life, but to say that, because of the unpredictability of the results and indeed nature of action, it is something we can only comprehend retrospectively. Thus we need the historian to tell the story to let us know what we have done (192).²¹ But knowing that there *will* be history gives the actor a shot at immortality.

Or, that is how it *was*, until Plato, who claimed that what he called *ideias* were unchanging and that this gave him a superiority over the man of action. As Arendt (20) says, this was the beginning of a commitment of Western philosophy to hoist the *eternal* over the *immortal*. But of even greater concern to her in the modern world is the rise of a focus on labor that has no temporal extension whatsoever.

Rise of animal laborans

For Arendt, the culmination of the book is her critique of current society as the complete victory of the valorization of labor, and the rise of what she calls “*animal laborans*” (in a different genus than *homo faber*) as the archetypal active human in it. As might be expected with a critique of “society nowadays,” this portion has not aged well. The connections she makes vary from the brilliant to the implausible, and she seems to throw a number of things in higgledy-piggledy that do not obviously belong together. For this reason, I will go briefly over her argument here. Her critique of the valorization of labor, which was ushered in by socialism, is only the beginning of her argument; further, it is not intended as a rude dismissal of Marx’s own work, which she considered important and impressive.²² Still, as I will return to in the conclusion, she does not seem to accept that Marx might have a totally different approach to human activity, one that stems from the Hegelian dialectic of externalization, and one that might not fit her scheme.

In any case, what is the problem with the labor-oriented society? Arendt (5) sometimes makes it seem like the problem is merely that mechanization promises to make us a society of people who believe only in labor – and don’t have to. But this is only scratching the surface of the problem. First, she makes the non-obvious claim that mechanization has undermined work, not simply by actually replacing the workman with the laborer, but, more important, by changing the focus of thought from product to *process*;²³ this change in scientific understanding parallels or indicates a corresponding change in social and economic organization. Despite the connection of this process with *action*

(given the exaltation of current activity over product), she sees it as closer to the instantaneity of labor. Further, the products of this mechanized process, even though they are technically durable, become understood as *consumables* (124).²⁴ This leads (or perhaps is led by?) a general decline of the values of the workman’s world – durability, stability – and a rise in those of the laborer’s – *abundance*. Abundance may well be a worthy goal, but it is one that does nothing about the fundamental futility of the life process (126, 131). Thus while the products of *work* had promised to give mortals “a dwelling place more permanent and more stable than themselves,” our mechanized production fails to accomplish this (152).

Most worrisome in the rise of *animal laborans* is the fact that it implies (to Arendt) that there can be no public sphere; mere labor does not, we recall, induce objectivity. Rather than true publicity, a society of laborers has “only private activities displayed in the open” (134). Further, with the assumption that life is obviously the highest good (312ff), a fundamentally Christian idea but now divorced from the belief in personal immortality, we find ourselves with one-half of the Christian reversal of ancient priorities. To the Greeks, man but not the world was mortal, and hence the way to achieve immortality was to act on the world. To the Christian, it is the world that is mortal, and the individual soul immortal – which of course devalues political action. But with the shift to *animal laborans*, we do not even understand ourselves as acting at all. Perhaps the most interesting part of Arendt’s critique is her implicit attack on social science, and her vision of science more properly understood.

Science and Behavior

Man and himself

Arendt in no way questions the remarkable advances the sciences have made. Yet she is completely unmoved, because she takes these to imply not that “we now know” what the world is really like, but rather, that we have learned to impose our own subjective nature on the world itself (287). To her, the pivotal moment in the history of science was marked by the discoveries of Galileo, which gave us a new way of understanding the earth and our place on it. Strangely enough, this subjection of the once-celestial spheres to visual observation coincided with a resignation of any hope of having direct understanding of the world via our senses (262).

The implication is that we have renounced any capacity to think in universal or absolute terms – even as we gained the capacity to *act* universally (270). This universal skepticism has had two corollaries. The first has been to further boost the role of *making*, and to subordinate *thinking* to this end.

"Theory became hypothesis, and the success of the hypothesis became truth"; reasoning devolved to "reckoning," the calculation of consequences (278, 284). And, of course, this type of thinking is singularly unable to deal with whatever action that *does* remain, because it becomes helpless and directionless in situations in which it has no hope of determining consequences. But such situations are inherent to action and its results, "where nothing happens more frequently than the totally unexpected" (300).

The second corollary is that our instrumental success may, in a way, isolate us even more from the world. With the new physics we find that instead of getting at the objective qualities of nature, "in the words of Heisenberg — man encounters only himself" (261). Our capacity to mathematize does not demonstrate that God is a mathematician, but that we can turn the entire world into patterns that "are identical with human, mental structures," the same ones we use to design our instruments and to set up experimental conditions to which we subject nature (266, 286).²⁵ We finally find, in words she takes from Descartes, that our mind, though not the measure of truth, is indeed "the measure of things that we affirm or deny" (279). For this reason we cannot, Arendt believes, shake the fear that we live in a dream world where everything we dream with our science assumes the character of reality only for as long as the dream lasts.

Thus Arendt's conception of this epistemic condition is perhaps more plausible than Weber's ([1915] 1946; [1919] 1946) notion of disenchantment; science is associated with an increasing meaningfulness not simply because it ignores meaning, but because it is the acme of the instrumental orientation, in which everything is a means to something else. (Further, her take may be less grandiose, paradoxical and sulky than that of her Frankfurt school rivals.) This regress is not solved by putting anything at the end — not even Man himself, as Kant proposed with his notion of a "realm of ends" ([1785] 1938). It is inherent in the human condition that we make our world, but when we make ourselves the measure of all things, we lack any capacity for growth, transcendence or greatness (159). And the social sciences only further this limitation of the human condition.

Sociology

Arendt's hostility to social science in general, and sociology in particular, is well known (see Baehr 2010b, 19, 45, 52, 56; Walsh 2015, 43). Perhaps the core of this is that she believed that sociology was not only a generalizing science that was unable to grapple with action, but one that tended to sap humans of their capacity for action and judgment. Given how compellingly convinced we are that the "individual" is a recent, bourgeois European

phenomenon, sociologists are perhaps blind to how they assume a *generiness* to human nature. It seems obvious to us that knowing what class, role or type a person is gives us nearly all we need to know about him or her. This genericness may be no less historically specific than individuality.²⁶ Yet we convince ourselves that the individualism of the Greeks — a key prerequisite of true action — is an impossibility.

Scientists, wrote Arendt, "move in a world where speech has lost its power" (4); to go on and apply this same scientific understanding to *ourselves* is fundamentally destructive. Social science seems to be based on doctrines that imply the further degradation of our capacity to act. Behaviorism is the most shocking and flagrant form of this reduction of action to mere life processes. Yet "the trouble with modern theories of behaviorism is not that they are wrong but that they could become true, that they actually are the best possible conceptualization of certain obvious trends in modern society" (322, 45).²⁷

Equally corrosive is the increasingly widespread use of statistics in the study of human action. As we all know, these statistics depend on "the law of large numbers." "Yet the meaningfulness of everyday relationships is disclosed not in everyday life but in rare deeds. . . . The application of the law of large numbers and long periods to politics or history signifies nothing less than the willful obliteration of their very subject matter" (42). Arendt does not deny that increasing the size of collective bodies implies the submergence of the political in the social, and the decreasing capacity of action to "stem the tide of behavior" — the large-scale motions of the aggregate that could be predicted by science (43). But social scientists certainly do not help matters when (like Quetelet and Durkheim) they suggest that the *average* equals the *normal* equals the *ethical* (this was a common German critique of the French school, and is implicit in Arendt's take).

In all these sociological approaches, we treat human activity as something caused by external phenomena; the actor becomes a patient, all is determined, we could do no other. It is this abandonment of the belief in human freedom that Arendt sees as connected to the failure of *judgment* that is perhaps her central indictment of the twentieth century. How can we judge someone who is driven by laws of necessity? (also see Arendt [1964c] 2003, 18f, 27). And if we cannot judge someone *else's* past errors, how are we likely to be able to make correct judgments ourselves, "when the chips are down"?

Any field of study that further degrades these already weakened faculties is an intellectual and an ethical abomination. It is quite true that in social science, just as with natural science, we have indeed been able to choose an Archimedean point considerably outside our own experience. Yet this leads us to a deep misunderstanding of our own capacities. We treat our own actions simply as if they were "process," and see our greatest accomplishments in the

same terms we would use to describe the blind mutation of some organism (322). Looking at ourselves *sub specie universalis*, we seem to ourselves to be ants. Thinking in a time scale that dwarfs that of the ancient Greeks, we would never entertain the absurd belief that our acts will live forever. And so we act like the ants we think we are.²⁸

Conclusion

Arendt has been important for many fields; for sociology, her great contribution is her capacity to reopen our concepts, and to see what routes were passed up as we settled into one way of parsing human life. Further, while not all of her historical claims bear weight, she has a remarkable capacity at helping the non-expert understand some long-past ways of seeing. On her home territory – political judgment and the ways in which we understand this – she is unsurpassed, and this means that she can teach us much about the nature of politics.

At the same time, there seems to be something strange and sad about her conviction – at least in *THC* and in other works of the 1950s – that politics is or should be the be all and end all of human activity and that she knowingly and deliberately takes her conceptual apparatus from a slave society in which almost all actual activity was forcibly delegated to others, and ceased to be of concern to the masters. As Arendt knew, her three categories – action, work and labor – correspond to the three great classes of the Greek polis as considered by Aristotle – the free masters, the “vulgar craftsmen” and the slaves. Arendt was no fool nor an apologist, but she did not worry that her concepts were too mixed up with these class relations for them to be applicable to a world of the universal franchise.²⁹

And this is because Arendt here remains within the opposition most powerfully structured by Kant ([1785] 1938) – do we think of ourselves *as actors*, in a “practical anthropology,” or do we see ourselves as *things*, subject to the general approach of “physics”? In *THC*, Arendt maps these onto the realms of “the political” and “the social,” respectively. Despite the great influence over her by the *Existenz* philosophers, who owed so much to the *Lebensphilosophie* of Schopenhauer, Nietzsche and Simmel, Arendt found no inspiration in the generic, animal *zoë*: it was the individual *bios*, the *story*, that she found compelling (and believed herself in accord with the Greeks here).

In part for this reason, the vitalist aspects of our understanding of labor – key for any serious engagement with Marx – were largely lost on her. Thus while *THC* arose as an attempt to grapple with Marx’s thought, it appears that he slipped away. The attempt to reduce Marx’s understanding of labor

to the dumb, animal repetition of a treadmill is painful in its falsity. Was he right or was he wrong. Marx saw labor as, *in potentia*, combining the sociality Arendt confined to action and the externalization she saw in fabrication.³⁰ Further, her insistence that fabrication necessarily elevates the made over the making is taken not from any firsthand experience of craftsmanship, but from the writings of Aristotle who, as a master, probably had no concrete sense of production, and only became interested in it to the extent that it delivered a product to him for his own use (cf. Plato [*Rep* 601c-d]).

Interestingly, Arendt (242) inadvertently reverts to a classic vitalist/dialectical image in her analysis of love, where she says that the only happy ending of a love affair is the birth of a child. Whether this is true is less interesting than her belated linking of *this* form of labor with life and love.³¹ This notion of creative production, though not the only one in the Western tradition (Joas 1996), does not fit into her division. It has the fundamental connection of life, circularity and bodily pain of her *labor*, the productivity and care of her *work* and the sociality and, indeed, immortality of her *action*. Yet, unlike her *action*, it is not based on antagonistic social relations that exclude want satisfaction as servile and fit only to be hidden, nor does it even have an intrinsically agonistic aspect. While Arendt’s *work* always has a satisfyingly *violent* relation to nature (140), involving the *imposition* of the maker’s will over the material, in this sort of production, the product, to use Giordano Bruno’s ([1584] 1998, 80) words, “does not receive dimensions from without, but sends them out and brings them forth as from its womb.” If, as I believe, this is the root of the conception of labor held by Hegel and Marx, it may perhaps suggest the need for a rethinking of the rethinking offered in *The Human Condition*.

Notes

- 1 Further, I think that this transition is to some degree seen in Bourdieu himself, frequent references to the “body” obscured his increasing rationalism as he reached for a totalistic system, something fundamentally incompatible with the core assumptions of his approach.
- 2 For Aristotle references, I use the Chicago (Bartlett and Collins) translation for the *Nicomachean Ethics*, the Hackett (Reeves) translation for the *Politics*, and the Loeb (Tredennick) translation for the *Posterior Analytics* for other works. I use McKee’s *Basic Works* for Plato’s *Republic*. I use the Basic (Bloom) edition. References are made using the Bekker system for Aristotle and the Stephanus for Plato.
- 3 This seems to be literally true: what we consider Aristotle’s *Ethics* and his *Politics* appear originally to have been a single work, only divided much later.
- 4 It was common for Germans to emphasize that judging – *Urteilung* – represented the primordial severing (*Ur-Teilung*), a point famously made by Hölderlin.

- 5 And by *history*, Arendt meant this telling of significant stories. This was how humans coped with the unforeseeable consequences and irreversibility of action; such tales are an attempt to reshape the past. It is, I believe, significant that when it comes to specifying just *what* it is these legends are to fit, Arendt uses the phrase “the human condition” – and then adds, “and political aspirations in particular.”
- 6 Interestingly, Arendt here attempted to handle changes in the understanding of *action* with almost no attention to changes in the understanding of the *virtù*, which was to occupy the second volume of her *Life of the Mind*. There, she (1978a; also 1951a, 157) made the strong claim that there was a fundamental shift in the understanding of this faculty with Augustine, and that previous ideas seemingly comparable with our post-Augustinian understanding were in fact fundamentally different.
- 7 The original Greek conception of the hero is simply someone who answers this question and is willing to suffer the consequences – “Courage and even boldness are already present in leaving one’s private hiding place and showing who one is, in disclosing and exposing one’s self” (186). Perhaps it is the influence of Heidegger that makes Arendt assume that this form of answering comes only in this disclosure, while she does not recognize that Marx conceives of the process of work as a different form of an answer. I return to this issue in closing.
- 8 It seems that, somewhat like the irresponsible zealots discussed by Weber ([1918] 1946), Arendt assumes that there is only a single end worthy of consideration.
- 9 That does not mean that such calculative behavior was never seen as demonstrating a sort of excellence; when (in *Angels with Dirty Faces*) the toughened gangster played by Jimmy Cagney allows himself to be convinced to “go yellow to the chair,” abnegating his last claim to worth in order to break the hold he has on youth who idolize him and who may follow his footsteps, he certainly has a sort of virtue. But it is, as Arendt would emphasize, a particularly Christian virtue that comes from *self-transcendence*, and not *self-actualization*.
- 10 This conception of action reappears in Machiavelli’s ([1531] 1998, 63) admission that had Gian Paolo Baglioni slaughtered the pope when the latter, quite impressively, came unarmed into Baglioni’s citadel to oppose him, this would have been an astounding (because unprecedented) action – no condemnation of treachery is attached. And, of course, this valorization of action was to reappear in Italy in the early twentieth century, associated with the Fascist movement.
- 11 Her distinction between labor and work (94) thereby also tends to parallel Marx’s between Department I and Department II (Marx [1885] 1909).
- 12 Thus, like Simmel (and like her admirer Habermas), Arendt links her triadic structure to that of the three grammatical persons; while some now see this as intrinsic to the overriding scheme of German idealism, this is not quite so, though it is reasonable to see the origins in Schelling; C. S. Peirce developed a similar scheme under Schelling’s influence.
- 13 Pftkin points out that this wholesale rejection of the social may have been an aberration in Arendt’s thought more generally (1998, 203). Within a few years, it seems that she rethought the issue; indeed, quite soon after *THC* Arendt (1959a, 55) emphasized a somewhat different distinction between three realms: the political, the social and the private. This does not map onto the conceptual structure of *THC*, and here, I consider only that approach.
- 14 As Latour (2005, 250) puts it, “If there is a society, *then no politics is possible*.”

- 15 Arendt (202) credits Montesquieu with being “the only one, as far as I know” to understand that the key problem with tyranny is that it rests on isolation – of tyrant from the people and the people from one another. Tyranny is thus not one form of government among others, but is negation of the very thing, substituting violence for power. This was, however, explicitly argued by Aristotle! (*Pol* 1314a20).
- 16 This is pleasantly analogous to an electrical potential that arises where surfaces with different charges are juxtaposed; Arendt herself does not employ this metaphor.
- 17 See Kopelowitz and Diamond (1998, 671).
- 18 For that reason it has formal similarities to judgments of aesthetics (1951a, 221ff); while a proper discussion exceeds the limitations of this work, I find Arendt’s repeated suggestions that a science of human action should have formal parallels to aesthetics the most interesting part of her work.
- 19 But to be fair, Plato argued that the *master* who has *ordered* and will *use* the product has a better grasp of form than the maker himself.
- 20 For Arendt (173), aesthetics is about the visible, even superficial qualities of objects, and she unashamedly returns to Plato’s idea of forms to explain why one table is more beautiful than another; equally functional table. Here again we see the correspondence of her ideas of aesthetics and her ideas of action.
- 21 I believe that this contradicts Arendt’s more pivotal point about the nature of action, as it implies a more consequentialist “reckoning” nor does it fit the most straightforward interpretation of Greek ideas, but this is an issue best left to experts. Arendt (173) also suggests that *work* of a certain kind may also be needed to support the immorality of the actor, namely *artwork*. Physical artworks are for her the acme of production, because they are the most *lasting*; not made for use, they are not depreciated in the same way as are other goods. They are thus the most durable of the durables.
- 22 Arendt (79) expressed some regret at having to weigh in against Marx, given that her day saw so many turncoats – one-time-Marxists daring to trash a great thinker for their own petty advancement.
- 23 For Arendt, this is associated with the loss of any valorization of contemplation and its replacement by “thinking” in terms of a means-to-an end of production (291f, 301, 307). “In the place of the concept of Being we now find the concept of Process” (296).
- 24 This is a more subtle version of the “consumption society” thesis – arguing that “now” it turns out to be the very *durability* of products that is the greatest impediment to turnover process and hence wealth (253). Since durability is always (by definition) an impediment to the turnover process, it seems that she (like others) is taking the fact that this process was only *theorized* to be vital for wealth in the nineteenth century and made a production goal in the twentieth to signify some sort of more logical change in the nature of wealth, which I do not understand.
- 25 Arendt seems to contradict this view when she emphasizes that new ideas of the universe are ones we can’t even *think* (288), but I take her point to be that although we can’t integrate these notions into a whole open to our intuitive contemplation, and can carry out only cognitive operations on them, these operations are ones that correspond to the nature of what our minds are good at.
- 26 For example, Hallpike (1977, 81) argued that the Taude of New Guinea had no clear sense of stereotypes associated with proper roles, and instead were oriented to the particular characteristics of each individual.

- 27 Pitkin (1998, 198ff) notes that Arendt cleverly evades the issue of whether such social scientific approaches, with their predictions and implicit constraint, are actually fundamentally flawed, or only imperfect. If the latter, her critique loses a great deal of its power.
- 28 Perhaps the best example of this approach is that of Luhmann, who refuses to attempt to incorporate the human and heroic understandings of action in his systems theory; it is interesting that while Arendt argued that we had lost the Greek understanding of politics, Luhmann (1990, 32) believed that we had not *yet* sufficiently purged our notion of politics of residues from Greece! "We tend to forget," he wrote drolly, "that since then, much has changed" (2000, 7). This was in as much as to say that Luhmann proposed a political system bereft of politics (though see 2000, 94).
- 29 Arendt (208) works out the conceptions of the greatest of our achievements for each of the three species of activity: for the *actor* it is one's own actualization, for *homo faber* there is the conception that "a man's products can be more . . . than he is himself," and of course there is *animal laborans'* belief that "He is the highest of all goods." She seems quite sympathetic to the *actor's* idea – common to all nobilities – that only the vulgar would get their pride from what they have *done*, as opposed to what they *are* (211). While a conservative like Oakeshott may recognize the aspects of embodiment worthy of appreciation and valorization, perhaps missed by the social critic Bourdieu [1979] 1984), the reverse is also true, and Arendt seems to miss one half of an inherently relational conception.
- 30 Marx preserved an analytic distinction between *social* labor and *individual* labor; and saw the potential for true creativity and self-realization only in the former.
- 31 Pitkin (1998, 166–169) I believe errs in thinking that Arendt must see *animal laborans* as feminine. Pitkin's reasoning here is that because some of Arendt's predicates for *animal laborans* are gendered feminine by *others*, this may be taken to apply to her own thought, which seems very shaky to me.

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