**Institute of Philosophy Admissions  
Academic Reading and Writing Assignment for students applying to the Bachelor of Philosophy programme**

The following text is taken from Arendt, H. (1987). Labor, Work, Action. In: Bernauer, S.J.J.W. (eds) Amor Mundi. Boston College Studies in Philosophy, vol 26. Springer, Dordrecht. Please read the text carefully and answer the following nine questions. You will not need extra knowledge in order to do so; everything you need to know can be found in the text itself. Word limits should be strictly observed.

1. Hannah Arendt says: “It is only natural that active life has always been described by those who themselves followed the contemplative way of life.” Why would that be the case? *(30-50 words)*

Contemplation is dependent on all sorts of activities, and traditionally active life serves the end of contemplation. Therefore, those who followed the contemplative way of life have the need to understand them so that they can participate in activities with a view to contemplation.

1. How does Arendt explain the traditionally higher esteem for contemplative life? (50-100 words)

The Greek philosophers first founded the tradition that contemplation being the highest of the human faculties. Though frequently assumed to have, and some doctrines should have, elevated active life to a higher position, Christianity nevertheless inherited this hierarchy for two reasons. First, the order among human faculties are established through one fundamental principle, the truth, which opposes the plurality of activities. Second, since the fundamental truth is considered as revelation given to men, not something through mental or physical activities, action cannot have meaning and end within itself.

1. How do you understand Arendt’s claim that in modern times contemplation had become meaningless? *(50-100 words)*

I think this is the consequence of the “re-evaluation of all values”, which, on a fundamental level, questions whether the experience of contemplation is beneficial at all for a good life. Alternatively, a good life is re-evaluated as an active life where will is not obstructed by contemplative ends or duties so that man can be truly free. Consequently, on the political level, the best regime is no longer considered deliberative and peaceful, which serves the need for contemplation. Therefore, although the teleological understanding of actions may still prevail, the traditional value of contemplation has been dismissed.

1. What do you take to be some of the most important features of labour according to Arendt? Give a concrete example that you do not find in the text*. (100-150 words)*

I believe some of the most important features of labor include its necessary repetitiveness, the transience of its product, its natural good, and fertility.

For example, maintaining hygiene and health is essential for life. Therefore, man are compelled to do laundry, since all men wear clothes. However, cleanness of clothes will quickly become consumed through wearing, or destroyed by dust, ticks, and mites if stored for too long. In either case, the cleanness cannot lasting long and washing must be done repeatedly for hygiene and health. The act of sanitizing stinky clothes is an exhausting and repetitive burden. Nevertheless, we can find a sense of being alive through this labor, and the reward of it, wearing a clean outfit, is naturally refreshing and pleasant. Moreover, this burden can be lightened through slaves due to the fertility of human labor, or through technology such as washing machines.

1. What do you take to be some of the most important features of work according to Arendt? Give a concrete example that you do not find in the text. *(100-150 words)*

Work is the creation of durable artificial products, which altogether constitutes a constant world for living. All work is determined by the category of means and ends. The end justifies and organizes the means, but in a strictly utilitarian world, the end transforms into means for further ends, leading to an infinite regression and meaninglessness.

For example, when humans remove wool that naturally belongs to sheep and weave it into sweaters that endure wear and washing, they create an artificial yet stable object that provides protection from cold weather. Human gets to dictate the type of sweater to be made, and this determines how it is woven and what tools to be used. However, the utility of the sweater becomes perplexing if its value is derived only from the product’s function, i.e. keeping warm, as this requires another end to justify its worth, and so on endlessly.

1. What do you take to be some of the most important features of action according to Arendt? Give a concrete example that you do not find in the text. *(100-150 words)*

Action, surpassing the man-made world, initiates something new in the web of human relationships. Therefore, it gives birth to our non-biological life and grants freedom to us when we are inserted into the world of others. It is closely related to speech, which enables us to identify ourselves among others, and it may generate stories that reveals the meaning of our lives. Unlike work, however, it consequences are unpredictable and irreversible.

For example, Socrates’ examination of Athenian’s life surpasses conventions and led to his death. But he disclosed who he is by his speeches that his choice of life was not bound even by death. His speech and deed initiated philosophers’ care about human virtue, and Xenophon’s and Plato’s writings fully revealed the meaning of his life. Yet he couldn’t determine how Plato or Aristophanes was going to portray him, nor could he predict or undo the accusation against him.

1. Why, as far as you can see, does Arendt emphasise the importance of forgiveness and of making promises? *(50-100 words)*

We built the artificial world to escape the imprisonment of the circular life process, and we enter the realm of action to find meaning for the artificial world. However, the realm of action, due to its complete unpredictability and irreversibility, makes us extremely fragile. Yet we must live in it so that we can become who we are, and gain freedom. Therefore, we need promises and forgiveness to deal with its unpredictability and irreversibility. Promises stabilize the unpredictability of human nature and produce identity, while forgiveness prevents us from being confined by the past and secures freedom.

1. Select a sentence/passage/claim from the text that stands out for you. For example, you may find it especially interesting, convincing, problematic, unconvincing, etc. Explain why. *(100-150 words)*

I found Arendt’s claim that “only because we erected a world of objects … can we look upon nature as something ‘objective’” interesting. She means that objectivity comes, not from nature, but from durable objects which are only made by man. This challenges the common understanding that men create subjective things like *nomos*, while objective truths stem from *physis*. Also, durable things, like mountains or caves, can come from nature.

However, Arendt is not saying that there’s no objectivity in nature, but that we cannot conceive it as something objective until we have built the man-made world. Objectivity does not simply, as commonly understood, come from the correct correspondence of our beliefs to actual things. Instead, she argues that the use of durable man-made objects bestows our identity. Only with this identity as a precondition, will nature manifest as objective being, and will we pursue our own being in action.

1. Select a sentence/passage/claim from the text that you find especially difficult to comprehend. Try to formulate a question that, if answered, might help you understand. *(100-150 words)*

I found Arendt’s claim that the real story are “not products” and “is not made” difficult to comprehend because she is inconsistent with the meaning of story. When she said the action’s unpredictability produces stories, she meant the stories written down. Later when saying “everybody starts his own life-story”, she seems to shift to abstract story which is equivalent to life taken as a whole.

If the former one defines the real story, then those recorded by stories are not able to determine who they are. Moreover, since “in stories the actual meaning of human life reveals itself” while very few get recorded, the meaning of most of our lives would be futile.

The latter one seems more comforting since everyone can “make” virtue and the meaning of life through action. Yet it contradicts the claim that real story “is not made”.

Thus, how does Arendt understand the *real* story?