Hannah Arendt on the Triumph of *homo faber* and the Fragility of Human Action

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Rebel, refugee, and political thinker, Hannah Arendt (1906-1975) is renowned for grappling with grave themes. She attempted to make sense of the horrors of the twentieth century and to understand the human experience in the context of modernity. Because she centered this exposition on how we approach work and activity, rather than our traits and dispositions, her schema for understanding what it means to be human is especially relevant to the aims of this volume. Arendt’s framework for thinking about something typically considered quotidian—the human experience of work—has been impactful, generating attention in fields as diverse as sociology, occupational science, and management studies.[[1]](#endnote-1) These days, scholars and pundits look to Arendt to reckon with various socio-political ills, such as “the decline of liberal democracy, the spread of fake news, the rise of the social sphere, the triumph of technology, the loss of the private realm and the experience of mass loneliness.”[[2]](#endnote-2) Her work is not above reproach, however, as feminists and democratic theorists alike have criticized aspects of her oeuvre.[[3]](#endnote-3)

Posited in her treatise *The Human Condition* (1958), her distinctions between labor, work, and action offer a typology of the human effort we call work. This chapter provides an overview of Arendt’s categories of labor, work, and action, which together comprise the *vita activa*, before focusing on the category of work and its relationship to the possibility of human action in a free society. Though on the surface these themes appear separate from her philosophical attention to themes like totalitarianism and evil, Arendt’s conception of the *vita activa* was profoundly political and therefore was germane to, not just understanding quotidian life, but all social and political life. Given the political implications of Arendt’s argument about action and political life, this chapter necessarily explores the maintenance of freedom and the fragility of action in our modern era. Lastly, this chapter concludes by connecting the themes surfaced in Arendt’s exploration of the *vita activa* to some of the other themes of her broader work, like totalitarianism, evil, and revolution.

Among the luminaries examined in this volume, Arendt offers a unique perspective because her account of work is embedded within her exploration of how human activity and human atrocity are related. Additionally, her subtle suspicion of work, due to its potential to distract us from action, distinguishes her account from other descriptions of work that either honor work as an important calling or criticize work as a prison. She provides neither a panegyric nor renunciation of work, but rather she uncovers nuances concerning the theme of work and its place in our understanding of human activity. These nuances matter to Arendt because she considers freedom to be hanging in the balance.

Born to Jewish secular parents, Arendt seemed suited to philosophy from a young age.[[4]](#endnote-4) She reflected that as a teenager she knew what philosophy meant to her, stating “I can either study philosophy or I can drown myself.”[[5]](#endnote-5) At university, Arendt studied with Martin Heidegger and Karl Jaspers.[[6]](#endnote-6) In 1929, she left Heidelberg for Berlin, and she soon found herself amid the burgeoning uncertainty of 1930s Berlin.[[7]](#endnote-7) In 1933, her husband, the communist-leaning Günther Anders, moved to Paris.[[8]](#endnote-8) Soon, she was arrested, and she too escaped to Paris.[[9]](#endnote-9) Arendt and Anders grew apart, and in Paris, Arendt met her second husband Heinrich Blücher.[[10]](#endnote-10) Before finally fleeing to the United States in 1941, Arendt was detained in an internment camp in the south of France.[[11]](#endnote-11) In the United States, she established herself as an academic, writer, and thinker, producing her great philosophical works and making sense of the horrors she and so many had witnessed in previous decades.

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

Arendt’s conception of the *vita activa* is comprised of “three fundamental human activities: labor, work and action.”[[12]](#endnote-12) As Paul Voice says, these “represent Arendt’s account of what it means to be human.”[[13]](#endnote-13) Arendt describes the rise and fall of the “the term *vita activa*,” considering that with the decline “of the ancient city-state,” this idea of the active life lost “political meaning.”[[14]](#endnote-14) She says this is because over time “action” was deemed essential to “earthly life” much like labor and work, and this meant “contemplation” and “the *vita contemplativa*” rose in prominence “as the only truly free way of life.”[[15]](#endnote-15) Arendt traces the idea of the eminence of contemplation over activity to antiquity, and she links the value placed by the ancients on freedom “from political activity” to the value placed by Christian thinkers on freedom “from entanglement in worldly affairs.”[[16]](#endnote-16) The Christian perspective democratized this aspiration as not only for elite contemplatives, but as “a right for all.”[[17]](#endnote-17)

Arendt establishes what she terms the “traditional” understanding of the *vita activa.*[[18]](#endnote-18) According to Arendt, the *vita activa* has long held a “negative connotation of ‘un-quiet,’” and the preference for “contemplation over activity” stems from the belief that “no work of human hands can equal in beauty and truth the physical *kosmos.*”[[19]](#endnote-19) Mere production to meet needs pales in comparison to higher contemplation. Thus, conventionally, *vita activa* is defined with reference to “*vita contemplativa*” because active life merely “serves the needs” of the contemplative life.[[20]](#endnote-20) It is secondary and lower.

Arendt proposes to understand the *vita activa* differently.[[21]](#endnote-21) She believes this revision is needed because the “weight of contemplation in the traditional hierarchy has blurred the distinctions and articulations within the *vita activa* itself,” which she aims to recover.[[22]](#endnote-22) She contends that even major modern philosophical shifts, brought by the likes of Marx and Nietzsche, did not upend this traditional understanding of the active life.[[23]](#endnote-23) Arendt positions her account as different from both traditional and modern assumptions by suggesting that “the concern” underpinning the “activities” of the *vita activa* “is not the same as and is neither superior nor inferior to the central concern of the *vita contemplativa.*”[[24]](#endnote-24)

Having established Arendt’s hope to rehabilitate the reputation of the *vita activa*, we now turn to those distinctions between the three principal facets of the *vita activa* that she discerns. First, Arendt explores labor. The material matters of “life itself,” like “growth, metabolism, and eventual decay,” define labor.[[25]](#endnote-25) For Arendt, “labor is the activity which corresponds to the biological process of the human body;” labor serves the “vital necessities” of the body.[[26]](#endnote-26) The activity of labor can be identified by the evanescence of its products: “its effort is almost as quickly consumed as the effort is spent.”[[27]](#endnote-27) Though there appears a degree of “futility” in these efforts, there is also “great urgency,” given “life itself” relies on this activity.[[28]](#endnote-28) Because the “least durable of tangible things,” consumed rapidly, support life, labor curiously contains both “the least worldly” and “the most natural of all things.”[[29]](#endnote-29) Though what labor produces is “man-made,” these objects are not lasting, but rather exist within nature’s “cyclical movement.”[[30]](#endnote-30)

Next, work proves more complex. Work denotes “the activity” that exists outside the “ever-recurring life cycle.”[[31]](#endnote-31) Work produces “an ‘artificial’ world of things,” distinguished from the natural world, and while life inhabits this “artificial world,” nevertheless, “this world itself is meant to outlast and transcend” life.[[32]](#endnote-32) Where labor held both worldly and unworldly features, work corresponds to “worldliness.”[[33]](#endnote-33) Arendt differentiates between “[t]he work of our hands” and “the labor of our bodies,” and she holds that work creates the “things whose sum total constitutes the human artifice.”[[34]](#endnote-34) These “things” are “objects for use,” but unlike that which is produced by labor, “[t]heir proper use does not cause them to disappear.”[[35]](#endnote-35) Rather, they provide for the “stability and solidity” that protects and contains humankind, while their “durability” endows them with a quality of objective separateness from our “voracious needs and wants.”[[36]](#endnote-36)

Here, Arendt introduces her idea of the *homo faber*, the making man. He is “the creator of the human artifice” and “a destroyer of nature” because work and “fabrication” always involve detaching resources from a “natural location” through “violation and violence.”[[37]](#endnote-37) The *homo faber* is distinct from *animal laborans*, and where *animal laborans* is dependent, *homo faber* is “lord and master of the whole earth.”[[38]](#endnote-38) The process of work, including the “violence” that extracts “the material torn out of nature” and the “solidity” that follows, entails a superior type of “human strength” that is unlike the “pleasure or exhaustion in earning one’s bread” or “in sheer labor.”[[39]](#endnote-39) Further, because all “work of fabrication is performed under the guidance of a model,” work contains a quality of “infinite” production and reproduction because this model has been and can always be referenced.[[40]](#endnote-40) Arendt reminds readers that the “potential multiplication,” intrinsic to the category of work, is distinct from the cyclical “repetition” of the category of labor because it “multiplies something” with “a relatively stable, relatively permanent existence in the world,” rather than repeats according to natural processes.[[41]](#endnote-41) The ends of the work of *homo faber* are indisputable: the end is evident “when an entirely new thing with enough durability to remain in the world as an independent entity has been added to the human artifice.”[[42]](#endnote-42) Work possess “a definite beginning and a definite, predictable end.”[[43]](#endnote-43) This makes it different from labor, which serves “the cyclical movement of the body’s life process” and “has neither a beginning nor an end,” and different from action, which is has “a definite beginning” but not a “a predictable end.”[[44]](#endnote-44)

Lastly, Arendt defines action, and this definition receives perhaps the most scholarly attention, from tracing the origins of her understanding of action to defending her perspective on action.[[45]](#endnote-45) For Arendt, action operates “directly between men without the intermediary of things or matter,” and it relates to “plurality,” i.e., the reality that *we*, in the plural, live together “and inhabit the world.”[[46]](#endnote-46) She notes that “this plurality” underpins “all political life.”[[47]](#endnote-47) Arendt explains that “[p]lurality is the condition of human action because we are all the same, that is, human, in such a way that nobody is ever the same as anyone else.”[[48]](#endnote-48)

Though all activities relate to “natality and morality,” Arendt connects action with the concept of “natality” in an important way.[[49]](#endnote-49) There is a “new beginning inherent in birth” that impacts the environment solely “because the newcomer possesses the capacity of beginning something anew, that is, of acting.”[[50]](#endnote-50) For Arendt, “natality” has a quality of “initiative,” and she suggests that because action is closely related to “political activity” then “natality,” too, is an important element of politics.[[51]](#endnote-51) Action is a political activity that features both plurality and natality.

Arendt argues that “[s]peech and action” allow us to show ourselves to each other “*qua* men,” not as “objects” but as people, beyond “mere bodily existence.”[[52]](#endnote-52) This way we show ourselves to each other and “distinguish” ourselves “rests on initiative,” and it defines us relationally, as humans.[[53]](#endnote-53) To exist “without speech and without action” is to exist without fellows, and, therefore, it is a “dead,” unhuman life.[[54]](#endnote-54) Action is committed by “word and deed” in order to make ourselves part of “the human world,” and the effort to “insert into” or to “join” the world resembles “birth.”[[55]](#endnote-55) This is based on “initiative,” rather than “necessity, like labor” or “utility, like work.”[[56]](#endnote-56) Action is also distinguished from labor and work because it contains a quality of “the unexpected” and “improbable.”[[57]](#endnote-57) Where labor follows predictable natural needs and work follows a model, action instead possess the potential for originality and spontaneity. Further, action cannot be undertaken “in isolation,” given its social, relational, and revelatory nature.[[58]](#endnote-58) Action does not require a model, as in work, but it does require others. Action, thus, for Arendt, is the most human part of the *vita activa*.[[59]](#endnote-59)

Paul Voice summarizes that according to Arendt “an action can be described as a moment of origination that discloses the individual actor within a plurality of others who constitute an audience and who are bound to the actor by a common world.”[[60]](#endnote-60) In practice, this means that “authentic political action is speech,” not in a “formal” sense, but in a deliberative and relational sense.[[61]](#endnote-61) This leads Arendt to favor a form of politics that prizes “free deliberation, discussion, and dispute.”[[62]](#endnote-62) Thus, within this category of action, we arrive at forms of participatory and deliberative politics based on the human disclosure born of initiative.

The activities of the active life each relate to freedom in distinctive ways.[[63]](#endnote-63) In particular, according to Arendt, freedom is action, and, as noted, action makes us human; this marries freedom to what it means to be human, or indeed “the purpose of life.”[[64]](#endnote-64) This is more obvious in contradistinction to the other categories: action avoids “the necessitations of labour as well as the necessitations of means-end thinking that constitutes the instrumentality of work,” as Voice explains.[[65]](#endnote-65) The liberty inherent in action delivers us the opportunity to overcome “the limitations of our embodied selves and the mechanical thinking of instrumentality.”[[66]](#endnote-66) Labor is activity oriented to making the consumable, necessary things. Work is activity oriented to making the permanent, useful things. Differentiated from the “necessity of labor and the utility of work,” action is activity oriented towards something beyond these things.[[67]](#endnote-67) As noted above, Arendt saw these “three activities” of the *vita activa* as related to “natality and mortality:”[[68]](#endnote-68) labor protects our “survival,” while work allows for some “permanence and durability” amid the “futility” and ephemera of existence.[[69]](#endnote-69) For its part, because action establishes “political bodies,” action establishes memory and “history.”[[70]](#endnote-70) The efforts of the active life are based in “natality” because they “provide and preserve the world for, to foresee and reckon with, the constant influx of newcomers who are born into the world as strangers.”[[71]](#endnote-71) The efforts of the *vita activa* emerge as most clear and purposeful with “the culminating experience of free action.”[[72]](#endnote-72) This is why action is pre-eminent with Arendt’s account, and it is these types of “distinctions and articulations within the *vita activa* itself” that she wishes to recover by rehabilitating the reputation of the *vita activa* as a whole.[[73]](#endnote-73) Her account prizes action over other activities of human effort, countering both the perspective that prioritizes the *vita contemplativa* and the perspective that undervalues action (and thereby, politics).[[74]](#endnote-74) Survey of Arendt’s broad account of human activity contextualizes her concern regarding work. Readers can better understand Arendt’s justification of her skepticism of work by seeing how she valued work within the *vita activa*.

**The *homo faber*, the Fragility of Action, and Modernity**

With Arendt’s typology of human activity in mind, we now turn to work, specifically, and the triumph of the *homo faber* in the modern era. To understand the prominence of *homo faber* and how his pre-eminence affects action and the maintenance of freedom, it is useful to examine *homo faber* and his activity, work, more closely. For Arendt, *homo faber* is truly individualistic, “a lord and master,” because he is neither subject to the whims and cycles of nature, like a laboring animal, nor subject to the interdependence of human fellowship, like “the man of action.”[[75]](#endnote-75) Solitary, he is able “to produce” and “to destroy.”[[76]](#endnote-76)

*Homo faber* makes tools.[[77]](#endnote-77) The tools of *homo faber* “are dictated by such ‘objective’ aims as he may wish to invent, rather than by subjective needs and wants.”[[78]](#endnote-78) These “aims” relate to the “fundamental experience of instrumentality” that defines the work of the *homo faber*, which allows for the axiom “that the end justifies the means.”[[79]](#endnote-79) For example, “the wood justifies killing the tree and the table justifies destroying the wood.”[[80]](#endnote-80) Arendt explains that this instrumentality implies that “end product organizes the work process itself” because all elements of the work are considered only “in terms of suitability and usefulness for the desired end.”[[81]](#endnote-81) The product is judged along similar lines to the process, and Arendt thinks that this yields an infinite “chain” of “utility” and instrumentalization.[[82]](#endnote-82) Arendt notes “all ends” can become “means” in a new context.[[83]](#endnote-83) This worries Arendt. She predicts that amid the “instrumentality which rules over the whole world of use objects and utility,” true “meaning” is lost.[[84]](#endnote-84) All ends eventually become “an object among objects” in *homo faber*’s “arsenal” of tools for work.[[85]](#endnote-85) Though the ends of work are not consumed or fleeting, as in the case of labor, they nevertheless possess qualities that fade, as they yield to infinite instrumentalization. For Arendt, “[m]eaning” is “permanent,” suggesting that *homo faber* is detached from meaning.[[86]](#endnote-86) *Homo faber*, the “fabricator” preoccupied with “means and ends,” cannot comprehend “meaning,” just as “the *animal laborans*” cannot comprehend “instrumentality.”[[87]](#endnote-87)

Arendt suggests that in order to escape this “meaninglessness” found in “strictly utilitarian philosophy,”–derived from *homo faber*’s experience of reality–we may dismiss “the objective world of use things and fall back upon the subjectivity of use itself.”[[88]](#endnote-88) She means that “man himself” can exist as “the ultimate end” that severs the limitless “chain of ends and means” and endows “utility” with some “dignity.”[[89]](#endnote-89) Unfortunately, Arendt is pessimistic. As soon as *homo faber* makes himself “the highest end,” both his useful objects and “nature” transform into valueless “means.”[[90]](#endnote-90) This does not resolve the meaningless of the instrumental “chain.” *Homo faber* “instrumentalizes” and this “instrumentalization” reduces “all things into means,” instigating “their loss of intrinsic and independent value.”[[91]](#endnote-91)

Arendt explains that what matters in her investigation of work and *homo faber* is not “instrumentality” as such, but instead “the generalization of the fabrication experience in which usefulness and utility are established as the ultimate standards for life and the world of men.”[[92]](#endnote-92) Instrumentalization is not terrible per se, but it is worrying if instrumentalization consumes all efforts and activities of human society.

As noted, Arendt describes the superiority of action. Her description, however, does not imply that action is prioritized as it ought to be in modern society. Instead, she accounts for the triumph of *homo faber* and work in modern society. To explain this process, she notes the temptation of instrumentalization, but she also admits to the fragility inherent in action that makes it an arduous undertaking. Action, for Arendt, entails some daunting features: suffering, boundlessness, and unpredictability. The inherent sociability of action means all action intersects with and reacts to others; “the actor always moves among and in relation to other acting beings.”[[93]](#endnote-93) The acting person is at once “doer” and “sufferer.”[[94]](#endnote-94) Action, too, instigates a limitless “chain,” like work, but it is not a chain of meaninglessness.[[95]](#endnote-95) Reaction is never solely responsive or automatic because “action acts upon” free actors, every “reaction” constitutes “a new action that strikes out on its own and affects others.”[[96]](#endnote-96) Thus, action is highly networked. The efforts and effects of “action and reaction” are not “confined to two partners;” in fact, the “boundlessness” of action means “the smallest act” can instigate wide change.[[97]](#endnote-97)

In this context, Arendt notes that the “limiting and protecting principles” of our “human institutions,” e.g., “territorial boundaries” and “laws,” are fragile and essential precisely because they do not exist organically.[[98]](#endnote-98) The drama of action’s “boundlessness” coexists with its primary purpose, the “capacity for establishing relationships,” and Arendt highlights the importance of “moderation, of keeping within bounds” as “one of the political virtues par excellence.”[[99]](#endnote-99) We can moderate action in political life, using “various limitations and boundaries,” but these limits are impermanent in the face of action’s “inherent unpredictability.”[[100]](#endnote-100)

The unpredictability of action is made especially obvious in light of Arendt’s observation that “the light that illuminates processes of action, and therefore all historical processes, appears only at their end, frequently when all the participants are dead.”[[101]](#endnote-101) It is the “historian” and “storyteller” who evaluate the “product” of action, and this critical distance is quite unlike the proximate and immediate judgment of “the craftsman’s eye.”[[102]](#endnote-102) *Homo faber* is much closer to the product of his efforts than the man of action. The temptations and satisfactions of instrumentalization appear even more alluring considering the dramatic, unwieldly, and unknowable features that constitute action. For Arendt, the demands of action may mean we are at risk of inverting the proper hierarchy of the active life.

This inversion, in turn, has serious consequences. Not only a turn away from politics, but a turn towards individualism. Recall the isolation of *homo faber*. Arendt sees our era as defined by “alienation and loneliness,” as Dana Villa writes.[[103]](#endnote-103) Without “a stable and vibrant public realm” and sociability, the critical faculties of “the modern individual” weaken, and this isolation and detachment leaves “the modern individual” disposed to “an ideology” with seeming explanatory power and even to “totalitarian fictions.”[[104]](#endnote-104) This is described in her work on totalitarianism: the submission of the masses to totalitarian ideology parallels the collapse of a shared morality received from traditional modes of authority. Arendt worries that in the modern era, we are happy to forgo action and thereby relinquish political liberty and participation; perhaps, we are less inconvenienced, but we are also less free, less human.[[105]](#endnote-105) Importantly, though we associate Arendt with analysis of totalitarianism, and totalitarianism is the most extreme manifestation of this inclination, she saw this trend in other contexts, such as “liberal democratic societies,” like the United States, and Europe’s “bureaucratic welfare states.”[[106]](#endnote-106) Villa summarizes the evasion of action in both settings, according to Arendt’s logic: “If the majority of people in a particular polity thought of freedom as essentially the freedom from politics (as in America) or politics as the centralized administration of the needs of life (as in the European welfare state), then the public realm and its distinctive freedom were bound to be in jeopardy.”[[107]](#endnote-107) Though many moderns live in democracies, these democracies do not feature the action and participation that Arendt admires in her analysis of the active life.

Some scholars emphasize Arendt’s interest in participatory democracy as her hope for the preservation of action and the maintenance of freedom. For Arendt, participatory democracies that rely on “councils” allow for “a public space in which every citizen could act, speak and disclose her unique individuality before her peers and to strengthen the ability of every citizen to form a reasoned opinion, examine it vis-à-vis other opinions, and be a true participator in government.”[[108]](#endnote-108) However, the types of participatory democracy that Arendt admires are “historically rare;” apart from pointing to the classical world, she names a handful of short-lived instances, usually in revolutionary contexts.[[109]](#endnote-109) Contrasting her ideal of councils and participation, our “democratic states administer and bureaucratize,” degrading “citizens into subjects.”[[110]](#endnote-110) The temptation to satisfy oneself with the solitary, instrumental existence of the *homo faber* is reinforced by modern ideology, state infrastructure, and instrumental bureaucratization. Because large-scale forces soon enter the vacuum left by modern people’s inaction, once we forgo action (and freedom), regaining action is a challenge. For Arendt, the maintenance of freedom is precarious under these circumstances where work is so satisfying, action is so demanding, and states and ideologues are so opportunistic. Therefore, Arendt also warns that simply the downfall of ideologies like Nazism or Stalinism does not eliminate the potential of totalitarian tendencies in a society. Anywhere action is at risk, so too is freedom and meaning. Further, action is at risk wherever work distracts us. Therefore, the compelling satisfaction of work must be approached with caution. In turning away from the responsibilities of the man of action, *homo faber* seals his fate.

**The *Vita Activa* and Arendt’s Political Thought**

Apart from her typology of labor, work, and action, Arendt’s most famous themes include: totalitarianism, “the banality of evil,” and revolution. All of these areas relate to Arendt’s understanding of human activity and the possibility of freedom in the modern era. Jeffrey Isaac reminds us that we must examine Arendt’s thought “historically” because her context clarifies for readers that “her model of action was, above all, an effort to understand how the dreams of modern ideologues had produced monstrous nightmares and how it might be possible to reconstitute human dignity and freedom in a world laid waste by such nightmares.”[[111]](#endnote-111) Unique among the perspectives studied in this volume, Arendt’s account of human effort, activity, and work was bound up with understanding human atrocity and human liberty.

Arendt’s 1951 *The Origins of Totalitarianism* is an impressive attempt to grapple with “the critical elements—the practices, events, experiences, and attitudes—present in Europe between 1880 and 1933, elements whose combination made the emergence of something like totalitarianism possible.”[[112]](#endnote-112) Arendt makes, as Hans Morgenthau writes, an “outstanding contribution” within political theory by identifying “totalitarianism as a new form of government.”[[113]](#endnote-113) Aristotle’s classical typology of governmental regimes that had long-influenced modern typologies was inadequate in the effort to comprehend the “phenomenon of totalitarianism as it appears in Nazism and Bolshevism.”[[114]](#endnote-114) Arendt says that the “total domination” characteristic of totalitarianism is distinct “from other forms of political oppression known to us such as despotism, tyranny and dictatorship” and “that none of our traditional, legal, moral, or common sense utilitarian categories” serve us in making sense of these types of regimes.[[115]](#endnote-115) This reflection prompts Arendt’s analysis of “whether [totalitarianism] has its own essence.”[[116]](#endnote-116) Totalitarianism is not simply “tyranny;” it also features “an ideology” that assures coming atrocities and “the bureaucratization of” both “political power” and “terror.”[[117]](#endnote-117)

Though *The Human Condition* was published after Arendt’s work on totalitarianism, Arendt’s account of action relates to her understanding of totalitarianism. For Arendt, totalitarian ideology promotes an environment which eliminates “spontaneity,” that is, the ability to “initiate.”[[118]](#endnote-118) These terms, of course, put us in mind of Arendt’s definition of human action. The totalitarian environment was explicitly manifest “in the concentration camps,” that stole from individuals their capacity for action and their freedom by destroying first the “legal” and the “moral person,” and then lastly “individuality itself.”[[119]](#endnote-119) At the end of this process, there are no “persons capable of action;” rather, “there are simply bundles of reactions” with no discernible “free will.”[[120]](#endnote-120) As Arendt says, the domination of the totalitarian regime is complete when men become “marionettes without the slightest trace of spontaneity” and “specimen[s] of the animal-species man.”[[121]](#endnote-121) To the totalitarian regime, “individuality” becomes “intolerable.”[[122]](#endnote-122) Of course, most observers sense that totalitarian regimes destroy freedom, but Arendt explains how this hap pens; and her later exploration of action further elucidates the intersection of these regimes and human nature. Totalitarianism attacks the already fragile human capacity for action, and in so doing, supresses freedom.

Arendt also famously named the idea of “the banality of evil,” which emerged from her 1963 study of Nazi functionary Adolf Eichmann’s trial in Jerusalem. For Arendt, outside the typical categories, Eichmann embodied a startlingly different species of criminality.[[123]](#endnote-123) She thought Eichmann was intriguingly average, and she concluded that the evil of the Holocaust included a type of “banal” evil perpetrated, not by masterminds, but regular people “who viewed themselves as implementing policy and doing their jobs.”[[124]](#endnote-124) According to Arendt, Eichmann “had no motives” apart from his “extraordinary diligence in looking out for his personal advancement.”[[125]](#endnote-125) Eichmann’s “sheer thoughtlessness” is what “predisposed him to become one of the greatest criminals of that period.”[[126]](#endnote-126) This thoughtlessness led Arendt to her fascination with the faculty of judgment and her efforts to reestablish the significance of judgement within politics and to reunite thought and action, which had been long since severed within the philosophical tradition.

Arendt investigated this type of evil following the publication of *The Human Condition*, and her account of the “thoughtlessness” of this form of evil relates to her concern for the deterioration of human action and true political participation.[[127]](#endnote-127) Eichmann represented a situation in which critical faculties had deteriorated in the face of unthinkingly following the precept that “a law is a law.”[[128]](#endnote-128) In Eichmann’s case, the evil he committed could be “banal” because only the simple execution of “the law” is required under a government that is “criminal” in order to carry out “extreme evil.”[[129]](#endnote-129) Eichmann was not a man of action. The banal character of human atrocity can emerge where individuals turn from the participatory, social, and spontaneous character of action, forgo liberty, and obey reactively. Villa notes that Arendt’s account of the *vita activa* prompts readers to realize that the maintenance of liberty necessitates “a relatively stable human artifice of the sort totalitarianism makes impossible.”[[130]](#endnote-130) A sphere of human activity that encompasses the participation, sociability, and spontaneity of action fortifies civilizations against the threats of totalitarianism and its subsidiary “banal” evils.

Lastly, Arendt’s attention to the theme of revolution offers a more “optimistic” lens on action because, where her earlier works address the urgent concerns related to action, *On Revolution* (1963) praises “initiatory political action” and the prospect of social change.[[131]](#endnote-131) For Arendt, revolution entails “a new beginning,” “violence” that establishes “an altogether different form of government” and “body politic,” and “liberation from oppression.”[[132]](#endnote-132) In establishing her account of revolution, Arendt criticized standard interpretations of revolution. Albrecht Wellmer explains that Arendt concludes “both liberal democrats and Marxists have misunderstood the drama of modern revolutions,” due to neglecting the truly “revolutionary” aspect therein, which was an effort to institute “a political space of public freedom” where “free and equal citizens” could negotiate “their common concerns.”[[133]](#endnote-133) This oversight is due to the tendency of “the liberals and the Marxists” to organize political ideas in terms of “something beyond politics.”[[134]](#endnote-134) Arendt’s understanding of revolution is more grounded in ongoing political life, rather than a social ideal “beyond politics.”

For Arendt, reflecting on revolution, and the type of freedom immanent in revolution, allows her to establish “an idea of political freedom,” that was distinct from existing philosophical conventions.[[135]](#endnote-135) As Wellmer notes, she estimates that “the modern tradition of political thought” neglects “the experience of political action among equal yet diverse peers,” and thereby it cannot provide a thorough account of “political freedom.”[[136]](#endnote-136)

Totalitarianism, evil, and revolution are all relevant to Arendt’s preoccupation with the nuanced drawbacks of work. Where work diverts resources from action, oppression develops, and the prospect of change weakens.

**Activity and Freedom**

This chapter addresses Arendt’s account of human activity and highlights the temptations of instrumentalization, the burdens of action, and the risks posed to liberty in the modern era. Examination of Arendt’s hierarchy of labor, work, and action demonstrates her partiality to action, which she defines in contradistinction to the necessity of labor and the instrumentality of work. Action, though not urgent as labor is, emerges as the most important of the three activities, and without action, the other activities cannot take place under conditions of freedom. For Arendt, action is linked to political life and the exercise of freedom. Therefore, her concern for the fragility of action is also a concern for the fragility of free, participatory politics. In turn, we can understand Arendt’s analysis of the human condition, and these activities we undertake, as related to her philosophical interest in larger political themes like the evils of totalitarianism and the opportunities of revolution.

This volume addresses work from a variety of perspectives, and some may address links between work and freedom. Arendt’s perspective, however, is unusual in how her analysis of human activity relates to her analysis of human atrocity. Moreover, her skepticism of work in particular, as a seductive substitute to that which keeps us free and atrocity at bay—that is, action—offers a radical alternative to prevailing perspectives. She neither celebrates work, nor wholly disavows it, but she does demand we think more carefully about work because the possibility of freedom is at stake.

Finally, this very theme of thinking carefully defined Arendt’s later contributions, which had roots in her understanding of action, and the critical thinking, politics, and initiative that action entails. In later writings, she turns her attention more directly to examining “thinking, willing, and judging” as “the three basic mental activities.”[[137]](#endnote-137) It appears therefore that, as Villa notes, “the pre-eminent theorist of the *vita activa* concluded her life by re-engaging the *vita contemplativa*.”[[138]](#endnote-138) Now, however, she was less disparaging of the “anti-political” nature of the life of the mind and fully committed to philosophical contemplation, which had fascinated her since adolescence.[[139]](#endnote-139) Ultimately, she hoped to reunite these *vitas*, without hierarchy. She died in 1975, leaving historians and storytellers with the fruit of her thought and action and the task of determining “what it was all about.”[[140]](#endnote-140)

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