

Excerpts – The Human Condition - Hannah Arendt (1958)

The Fate of Our Times for Arendt

Closer at hand and perhaps equally decisive is another no less threatening event. This is the advent of automation, which in a few decades probably will empty the factories and liberate mankind from its oldest and most natural burden, the burden of laboring and the bondage to necessity... The modern age has carried with it a theoretical glorification of labor and has resulted in a factual transformation of the whole of society into a laboring society. The fulfilment of the wish, therefore, like the fulfilment of wishes in fairy tales, comes at a moment when it can only be self-defeating. It is a society of laborers which is about to be liberated from the fetters of labor, and this society does no longer know of those other higher and more meaningful activities for the sake of which this freedom would deserve to be won... Even presidents, kings, and prime ministers think of their offices in terms of a job necessary for the life of society, and among the intellectuals, only solitary individuals are left who consider what they are doing in terms of work and not in terms of making a living. What we are confronted with is the prospect of a society of laborers without labor, that is, without the only activity left to them. Surely, nothing could be worse.

Vita Actica: Labor, Work, Action; Preliminary Definitions

With the term vita activa, I propose to designate three fundamental human activities: labor, work, and action... **Labor** is the activity which corresponds to the biological process of the human body, whose spontaneous growth, metabolism, and eventual decay are bound to the vital necessities produced and fed into the life process by labor. The human condition of labor is life itself.

Work is the activity which corresponds to the unnaturalness of human existence, which is not imbedded in, and whose mortality is not compensated by, the species' ever-recurring life cycle. Work provides an "artificial" world of things, distinctly different from all natural surroundings. Within its borders each individual life is housed, while this world itself is meant to outlast and transcend them all. The human condition of work is worldliness.

Action, the only activity that goes on directly between men without the intermediary of things or matter, corresponds to the human condition of plurality, to the fact that men, not Man, live on the earth and inhabit the world... Plurality 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 who ever lived, lives, or will live.

Distinctions between Greek conception of the public/political life vs. Modern Conceptions of public life.

All three activities [labor, work, action] and their corresponding conditions are intimately connected with the most general condition of human existence: birth and death, natality and mortality. Labor assures not only individual survival, but the life of the species. Work and its product, the human artifact, bestow a measure of permanence and durability upon the futility of mortal life and the fleeting character of human time. Action, in so far as it engages in founding and preserving political bodies, creates the condition for remembrance...Labor and work, as well as action, are also rooted in natality in so far as they have the task to provide and preserve the world for, to foresee and reckon with, the constant influx of newcomers who are born into the world as strangers.

Aristotle distinguished three ways of life (*bioi*) which men might choose in freedom, that is, in full independence of the necessities of life and the relationships they originated...[The] three ways of life have in common that they were concerned with the "beautiful," that is, with things neither necessary nor merely useful: the life of enjoying bodily pleasures in which the beautiful, as it is given, is consumed; the life devoted to the matters of the polis, in which excellence produces beautiful deeds; and the life of the philosopher devoted to inquiry into, and contemplation of, things eternal, whose everlasting beauty can neither be brought about through the producing interference of man nor be changed through his consumption of them...[For Aristotle] neither labor nor work was considered to possess sufficient dignity to constitute a *bios* [i.e. proper life] at all, an autonomous and authentically human way of life; since they served and produced what was necessary and useful, they could not be free, independent of human needs and wants...

The "good life," as Aristotle called the life of the citizen, therefore was not merely better, more carefree or nobler than ordinary life, but of an altogether different quality. It was "good" to the extent that by having mastered the necessities of sheer life, by being freed from labor and work, and by overcoming the innate urge of all living creatures for their own survival, it was no longer bound to the biological life process...At the root of Greek political consciousness we find an unequaled clarity and articulateness in drawing this distinction. No activity that served only the purpose of making a living, of sustaining only the life process, was permitted to enter the political [i.e. of/related to the polis] realm.

Without mastering the necessities of life in the household, neither life nor the "good life" is possible, but *politics is never for the sake of life*. As far as the members of the polis are concerned, household life exists *for the sake of the "good life" in the polis*...

The emergence of society—the rise of housekeeping, its activities, problems, and organizational devices—from the shadowy interior of the household into the light of the public sphere, has not only blurred the old borderline between private and political, it has also changed almost beyond recognition the meaning of the two terms and their significance for the life of the individual and the citizen. Not only would we not agree with the Greeks that a life spent in the privacy of "one's own" (*idion*), outside the world of the common, is "idiotic" by definition...A man who lived only a private life, who like the slave was not permitted to enter the public realm, or like the barbarian

had chosen not to establish such a realm, was not fully human. We no longer think primarily of deprivation when we use the word "privacy," and this is partly due to the enormous enrichment of the private sphere through modern individualism.

Perhaps the clearest indication that society [i.e. the private] constitutes the public organization of the life process itself may be found in the fact that in a relatively short time the new social realm transformed all modern communities into societies of laborers and jobholders; in other words, they became at once centered around the one activity necessary to sustain life...To have a society of laborers [requires] only that all members consider whatever they do primarily as a way to sustain their own lives and those of their families...Society is the form in which the fact of mutual dependence for the sake of life and nothing else assumes public significance and where the activities connected with sheer survival are [imagined to constitute] the public. The admission of labor to public stature, far from eliminating its character as a process...has...liberated this process...In no other sphere of life do we appear to have attained such excellence as in the revolutionary transformation of laboring

Labor [Homo Laborans or Animal Laborans]:

The opinion that labor and work were despised in antiquity because only slaves were engaged in them is a prejudice of modern historians. The ancients reasoned the other way around and felt it necessary to possess slaves because of the slavish nature of all occupations that served the needs for the maintenance of life...To labor meant to be enslaved by necessity...and this enslavement was inherent in the conditions of human life. Because men were dominated by the necessities of life, they could win their freedom only through the domination of those whom they subjected to necessity by force. The slave's degradation was a blow of fate and a fate worse than death, because it carried with it a metamorphosis of man into something akin to a tame animal. A change in a slave's status, therefore, such as manumission by his master or a change in general political circumstance that elevated certain occupations to public relevance, automatically entailed a change in the slave's "nature."

The institution of slavery in antiquity, though not in later times, was not a device for cheap labor or an instrument of exploitation for profit but rather the attempt to exclude labor from the conditions of man's life. What men share with all other forms of animal life was not considered to be human. (This, incidentally, was also the reason for the much misunderstood Greek theory of the nonhuman nature of the slave. Aristotle, who argued this theory so explicitly, and then, on his deathbed, freed his slaves, may not have been so inconsistent as moderns are inclined to think. He denied not the slave's capacity to be human, but only the use of the word "men" for members of the species man-kind as long as they are totally subject to necessity.) And it is true that the use of the word "animal" in the concept of *animal laborans*, as distinguished from the...term *animal rationale*, is fully justified. The animal laborans is indeed only one, at best the highest, of the animal species which populate the earth.

It is surprising at first glance, however, that the modern age...with its reversal of all traditions...with its glorification of labor as the source of all values and its elevation of the *animal laborans* to the position traditionally held by the *animal rationale*—should not have brought forth a single theory in which **animal laborans** and **homo faber**, "the labour of our

body and the work of our hands," are clearly distinguished...It is indeed the mark of all laboring that it leaves nothing behind, that the result of its effort is almost as quickly consumed as the effort is spent. And yet this effort, despite its futility, is born of a great urgency and motivated by a more powerful drive than anything else, because life itself depends upon it.

Distinctions between Laboring, Working, and Acting:

Viewed as part of the world, the products of **work**—and **not the products of labor**—guarantee the permanence and **durability** without which a world would not be possible at all. It is within this world of durable things that we find the consumer goods through which life assures the means of its own survival. Needed by our bodies and produced by its laboring, but without **stability** of their own, these things for incessant consumption appear and disappear in an **environment** of things that are not consumed but used, and to which, as we use them, we become **used** and **accustomed**. As such, they give rise to the familiarity of the world, its customs and habits of intercourse between men and things as well as between men and men. **What consumer goods are for the life of man, use objects are for his world.** From them, consumer goods derive their thing-character...Distinguished from both, consumer goods and use objects, there are finally the "products" of action and speech, which together constitute the fabric of **human relationships** and affairs. Left to themselves, they lack not only the tangibility of other things, but are even less durable and more futile than what we produce for consumption. Their reality depends entirely upon **human plurality**, upon the constant presence of others who can see and hear and therefore testify to their existence. Acting and speaking are still outward manifestations of human life, which knows only one activity that, though related to the exterior world in many ways, is not necessarily manifest in it and needs neither to be seen nor heard nor used nor consumed in order to be real: the activity of thought.

Viewed, however, in their worldliness, action, speech, and thought have much more in common than any one of them has with work or labor. They themselves do not "produce," bring forth anything, they are as futile as life itself. In order to become worldly things, that is, deeds and facts and events and patterns of thoughts or ideas, they must first be seen, heard, and remembered and then transformed, reified as it were, into things—into sayings of poetry, the written page or the printed book, into paintings or sculpture, into all sorts of records, documents, and monuments. The whole factual world of human affairs depends for its reality and its continued existence, first, upon the presence of others who have seen and heard and will remember, and, second, on the transformation of the intangible into the tangibility of things. Without remembrance and without the reification which remembrance needs for its own fulfilment and which makes it, indeed, as the Greeks held, the mother of all arts, the living activities of action, speech, and thought would lose their reality at the end of each process and disappear as though they never had been.

The least durable of tangible things are those needed for the life process itself. Their consumption barely survives the act of their production...After a brief stay in the world, they return into the natural process which yielded them either through absorption into the life process of the human animal or through decay; in their man-made shape, through which they acquired their ephemeral place in the world of manmade things, they disappear more quickly than any other part of the world. Considered in their worldliness, they are the least worldly and at the

same time the most natural of all things...unlike *working*, whose end has come when the object is finished, ready to be added to the common world of things, *laboring* always moves in the same circle, which is prescribed by the biological process of the living organism and the end of its "toil and trouble" comes only with the death of this organism.

This destructive, devouring aspect of the laboring activity, to be sure, is visible only from the standpoint of the world and in distinction from work, which does not prepare matter for incorporation but changes it into material in order to work upon it and use the finished product.

The blessing of life as a whole, inherent in labor, can never be found in work and should not be mistaken for the inevitably brief spell of relief and joy which follows accomplishment and attends achievement. The blessing of labor is that effort and gratification follow each other as closely as producing and consuming the means of subsistence, so that happiness is a concomitant of the process itself, just as pleasure is a concomitant of the functioning of a healthy body...

The *animal laborans*, driven by the needs of its body, does not use this body freely as *homo faber* uses his hands, his primordial tools, which is why Plato suggested that laborers and slaves were not only subject to necessity and incapable of freedom but also unable to rule the "animal" part within them. A mass society of laborers...consists of worldless specimens of the species mankind, whether they are household slaves, driven into their predicament by the violence of others, or free, performing their functions willingly...The burden of biological life, weighing down and consuming the specifically human life-span between birth and death, can be eliminated only by the use of servants...

Tools and instruments which can ease the effort of labor considerably are themselves not a product of labor but of work; they do not belong in the process of consumption but are part and parcel of the world of use objects. Their role, no matter how great it may be in the labor of any given civilization, can never attain the fundamental importance of tools for all kinds of work. No work can be produced without tools, and the birth of *homo faber* and the coming into being of a man-made world of things are actually coeval with the discovery of tools and instruments...

In our need for more and more rapid replacement of the worldly things around us, we can no longer afford to use them, to respect and preserve their inherent durability; we must consume, devour, as it were, our houses and furniture and cars as though they were the "good things" of nature which spoil uselessly if they are not [consumed swiftly].

The ideals of *homo faber*, the fabricator of the world, which are permanence, stability, and durability, have been sacrificed to abundance, the ideal of the *animal laborans*.

It is frequently said that we live in a consumers' society, and since, as we saw, labor and consumption are but two stages of the same process, imposed upon man by the necessity of life, this is only another way of saying that we live in a society of laborers...we have almost succeeded in leveling all human activities to the common denominator of securing the necessities of life and providing for their abundance. Whatever we do, we are supposed to do for the sake of "making a living"; such is the verdict of society, and the number of people, especially in the professions who might challenge it, has decreased rapidly...**From the standpoint of "making a living," every activity unconnected with labor becomes a "hobby."**

One of the obvious danger signs that we may be on our way to bring into existence the ideal of the *animal laborans* is the extent to which our whole economy has become a waste economy, in which things must be almost as quickly devoured and discarded as they have appeared in the world, if the process itself is not to come to a sudden catastrophic end.

The world, the man-made home erected on earth and made of the material which earthly nature delivers into human hands, consists not of things that are consumed but of things that are used. If nature and the earth generally constitute the condition of human life, then the world and the things of the world constitute the condition under which this specifically human life can be at home on earth.

Work [Homo Faber]:

The work of our hands, as distinguished from the labor of our bodies—homofaber who makes and literally "works upon" as distinguished from the *animal laborans* which labors...**fabricates** the sheer unending variety of things whose sum total **constitutes the human artifice...** The **durability of the human artifice is not absolute;** the use we make of it, even though we do not consume it, uses it up...If left to itself or discarded from the human world, the chair will again become wood, and the wood will decay and return to the soil from which the tree sprang before it was cut off to become the material upon which to work and with which to build. What usage wears out is durability. It is this durability which gives the things of the world their relative independence from men who produced and use them, their "objectivity" which makes them withstand, "stand against" and endure, at least for a time, the voracious needs and wants of their living makers and users

Although use and consumption, like work and labor, are not the same, they seem to overlap in certain important areas to such an extent that the unanimous agreement with which both public and learned opinion have identified these two different matters seems well justified. Use, indeed, does contain an element of consumption, in so far as the wearing-out process comes about through the contact of the use object with the living consuming organism, and the closer the contact between the body and the used thing, the more plausible will an equation of the two appear. If one construes, for instance, the nature of use objects in terms of wearing apparel, he will be tempted to conclude that use is nothing but consumption at a slower pace. **Against this stands what we mentioned before, that destruction, though unavoidable, is incidental to use but inherent in consumption.** What distinguishes the most flimsy pair of shoes from mere consumer goods is that they do not spoil if I do not wear them, that they have an independence of their own, however modest, which enables them to survive even for a considerable time the changing moods of their owner. Used or unused, they will remain in the world for a certain while unless they are wantonly destroyed.

Tools and instruments are so intensely worldly objects that we can classify whole civilizations using them as criteria. Nowhere, however, is their worldly character more manifest than when they are used in labor processes, where they are indeed the only tangible things that survive both the labor and the consumption process itself. For the *animal laborans*, therefore, as it is subject to and constantly occupied with the devouring processes of life, the durability and stability of the

world are primarily represented in the tools and instruments it uses, and in a society of laborers, tools are very likely to assume a more than mere instrumental character or function.

The discussion of the whole problem of technology, that is, of the transformation of life and world through the introduction of the machine, has been strangely led astray through an all-too-exclusive concentration upon the service or disservice the machines render to men. The assumption here is that every tool and implement is primarily designed to make human life easier and human labor less painful. Their instrumentality is understood exclusively in this anthropocentric sense. But the instrumentality of tools and implements is much more closely related to the object it is designed to produce, and their sheer "human value" is restricted to the use the *animal laborans* makes of them. **In other words, homo faber, the toolmaker, invented tools and implements in order to erect a world, not—at least, not primarily—to help the human life process. The question therefore is not so much whether we are the masters or the slaves of our machines, but whether machines still serve the world and its things, or if, on the contrary, they and the automatic motion of their processes have begun to rule and even destroy world and things.**

For a society of laborers, the world of machines has become a substitute for the real world, even though this pseudo-world cannot fulfil the most important task of the human artifice, which is to offer mortals a dwelling place more permanent and more stable than themselves. In the continuous process of operation, this world of machines is even losing that independent worldly character which the tools and implements and the early machinery of the modern age so eminently possessed. The natural processes on which it feeds increasingly relate it to the biological process itself, so that the apparatuses we once handled freely begin to look as though they were "shells belonging to the human body as the shell belongs to the body of a turtle." Seen from the vantage point of this development, technology in fact no longer appears "as the product of a conscious human effort to enlarge material power, but rather like a biological development of mankind in which the innate structures of the human organism are transplanted in an ever increasing measure into the environment of man."

The philosophy of homo faber par excellence [utilitarianism; making things for use], can be diagnosed theoretically as an innate incapacity to understand the distinction between utility and meaningfulness, which we express linguistically by distinguishing between "in order to" and "for the sake of." **Thus the ideal of usefulness permeating a society of craftsmen—like the ideal of comfort in a society of laborers or the ideal of acquisition ruling commercial societies—is actually no longer a matter of utility but of meaning. It is "for the sake of" usefulness in general that homo faber judges and does everything in terms of "in order to."** The ideal of usefulness itself, like the ideals of other societies, can no longer be conceived as something needed in order to have something else; it simply defies questioning about its own use. Obviously there is no answer to the question which Lessing once put to the utilitarian philosophers of his time: **"And what is the use of use?"** The perplexity of utilitarianism is that it gets caught in the unending chain of means and ends without ever arriving at some principle which could justify the category of means and end, that is, of utility itself. The "in order to" has become the content of the "for the sake of"; in other words, utility established as meaning generates meaninglessness.

Within the category of means and end, and among the experiences of instrumentality which rules over the whole world of use objects and utility, there is no way to end the chain of means and ends and prevent all ends from eventually being used again as means, except to declare that one thing or another is "an end in itself." In the world of homo faber, where everything must be of some use, that is, must lend itself as an instrument to achieve something else, meaning itself can appear only as an end, as an "end in itself" which actually is either a tautology applying to all ends or a contradiction in terms.

[The zenith of public life for Homo Faber] is the exchange market, where he can show the products of his hand and receive the esteem which is due him. This inclination to showmanship is closely connected with and probably no less deeply rooted than the "propensity to truck, barter and exchange one thing for another," which, according to Adam Smith, distinguishes man from animal. The point is that homo faber, the builder of the world and the producer of things, can find his proper relationship to other people only by exchanging his products with theirs...The commercial society, characteristic of the earlier stages of the modern age or the beginnings of manufacturing capitalism, sprang from this "conspicuous production" with its concomitant hunger for universal possibilities of truck and barter, and its end came with the rise of labor and the labor society which replaced conspicuous production and its pride with "conspicuous consumption" and its concomitant vanity.

The man-made world of things, the human artifice erected by homo faber, becomes a home for mortal men, whose stability will endure and outlast the ever-changing movement of their lives and actions, only insomuch as it transcends both the sheer functionalism of things produced for consumption and the sheer utility of objects produced for use. Life in its non-biological sense, the span of time each man has between birth and death, manifests itself in action and speech, both of which share with life its essential futility. The "doing of great deeds and the speaking of great words" will leave no trace, no product that might endure after the moment of action and the spoken word has passed. If the animal laborans needs the help of homo faber to ease his labor and remove his pain, and if mortals need his help to erect a home on earth, acting and speaking men need the help of homo faber in his highest capacity, that is, the help of the artist, of poets and historiographers, of monument-builders or writers, because without them the only product of their activity, the story they enact and tell, would not survive at all. In order to be what the world is always meant to be, a home for men during their life on earth, the human artifice must be a place fit for action and speech...

Action

Only man can...distinguish himself, and only he can communicate himself and not merely something—thirst or hunger, affection or hostility or fear. In man, otherness, which he shares with everything that is, and distinctness, which he shares with everything alive, become uniqueness, and human plurality is the paradoxical plurality of unique beings.

Speech and action reveal this unique distinctness. Through them, men distinguish themselves instead of being merely distinct; they are the modes in which human beings appear to each other, not indeed as physical objects, but *qua* men. This appearance, as distinguished from mere bodily existence, rests on initiative, but it is an initiative from which no human being can refrain and still be human. This is true of no other activity in the *vita activa*. Men can very well live without laboring, they can force others to labor for them, and they can very well decide merely to use and

enjoy the world of things without themselves adding a single useful object to it; the life of an exploiter or slaveholder and the life of a parasite may be unjust, but they certainly are human. A life without speech and without action, on the other hand...is literally dead to the world; it has ceased to be a human life because it is no longer lived among men.

The new always happens against the overwhelming odds of statistical laws and their probability, which for all practical, everyday purposes amounts to certainty; the new therefore always appears in the guise of a miracle. The fact that man is capable of action means that the unexpected can be expected from him, that he is able to perform what is infinitely improbable. And this again is possible only because each man is unique, so that with each birth something uniquely new comes into the world. With respect to this somebody who is unique it can be truly said that nobody was there before.

In acting and speaking, men show who they are, reveal actively their unique personal identities and thus make their appearance in the human world, while their physical identities appear without any activity of their own in the unique shape of the body and sound of the voice. This disclosure of "who" in contradistinction to "what" somebody is—his qualities, gifts, talents, and shortcomings, which he may display or hide—is implicit in everything somebody says and does

The moment we want to say who somebody is, our very vocabulary leads us astray into saying what he is; we get entangled in a description of qualities he necessarily shares with others like him; we begin to describe a type or a "character" in the old meaning of the word, with the result that his specific uniqueness escapes us...This is only the first of many frustrations by which action, and consequently the togetherness and intercourse of men, are ridden...What is at stake is the revelatory character without which action and speech would lose all human relevance.

The chief characteristic of this specifically human life, whose appearance and disappearance constitute worldly events, is that it is itself always full of events which ultimately can be told as a story, establish a biography...action and speech...are indeed the two activities whose end result will always be a story with enough coherence to be told...

Although everybody started his life by inserting himself into the human world through action and speech, nobody is the author or producer of his own life story. In other words, the stories, the results of action and speech, reveal an agent, but this agent is not an author or producer. Somebody began it and is its subject in the twofold sense of the word, namely, its actor and sufferer, but nobody is its author...

The *polis*, properly speaking, is not the city-state in its physical location; it is the organization of the people as it arises out of acting and speaking together, and its true space lies between people living together for this purpose, no matter where they happen to be...It is the space of appearance in the widest sense of the word, namely, the space where I appear to others as others appear to me, where men exist not merely like other living or inanimate things but make their appearance explicitly. This space does not always exist, and although all men are capable of deed and word, most of them like...the jobholder or businessman in our world do not live in it. No man, moreover, can live in it all the time.

The conviction that the greatest that man can achieve is his own appearance and actualization is by no means a matter of course. Against it stands the conviction of homo faber that a man's products may be more—and not only more lasting—than he is himself, as well as the animal laborans' firm belief that life is the highest of all goods. Both, therefore, are, strictly speaking, unpolitical, and will incline to denounce action and speech as idleness, idle busybodiness and idle talk, and generally will judge public activities in terms of their usefulness to supposedly higher ends—to make the world more useful and more beautiful in the case of homo faber, to make life easier and longer in the case of the animal laborans.

We have seen that the animal laborans could be redeemed from its predicament of imprisonment in the ever-recurring cycle of the life process, of being forever subject to the necessity of labor and consumption, only through the mobilization of another human capacity, the capacity for making, fabricating, and producing of homo faber, who as a toolmaker not only eases the pain and trouble of laboring but also erects a world of durability. The redemption of life, which is sustained by labor, is worldliness, which is sustained by fabrication. We saw furthermore that homo faber could be redeemed from his predicament of meaninglessness...and the impossibility of finding valid standards in a world determined by the category of means and ends, only through the interrelated faculties of action and speech, which produce meaningful stories as naturally as fabrication produces use objects.

Arendt on how labor (not work or action) are the dominant activity in which human-beings participate in the modern world

Among the outstanding characteristics of the modern age from its beginning to our own time we find the typical attitudes of homo faber: his instrumentalization of the world, his confidence in tools and in the productivity of the maker of artificial objects; his trust in the all-comprehensive range of the means-end category, his conviction that every issue can be solved and every human motivation reduced to the principle of utility; his sovereignty, which regards everything given as material and thinks of the whole of nature as of "an immense fabric from which we can cut out whatever we want to resew it however we like."...What needs explanation is not the modern esteem of homo faber but the fact that this esteem was so quickly followed by the elevation of laboring to the highest position in the hierarchical order...Nothing perhaps indicates clearer the ultimate failure of homo faber to assert himself than the rapidity with which the principle of utility, the very quintessence of his world view, was found wanting and was superseded by the principle of "the greatest happiness of the greatest number." [As soon as Homo Faber] defines himself not as the maker of objects and the builder of the human artifice who incidentally invents tools, but considers himself primarily a toolmaker and "particularly [a maker] of tools to make tools" who only incidentally also produces things. If one applies the principle of utility in this context at all, then it refers primarily not to use objects and not to usage but to the production process. Now what helps stimulate productivity and lessens pain and effort is useful. In other words, the ultimate standard of measurement is not utility and usage at all, but "happiness," that is, the amount of pain and pleasure experienced in the production or in the consumption of things.