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05/10/2023
PHIL 499

Human Isolation and Consequential Suffering

Our wet planet Earth has about 332.5 million cubic miles of water flowing throughout, an unfathomable amount (USGS 2019).¹ Yet, water is just a tiny molecule of two hydrogen atoms bonded together with an oxygen atom, which as a collective forms water. This same water forms rivers, lakes, and oceans. Now, break apart the bond between the atoms and extract the fleeting oxygen. Can one call this oxygen atom water? One's intuition would find it absurd to label a free oxygen atom as water. The underlying metaphysical discussion of parts and wholes is complex. Isolating objects from their collectives is complex. Isolating a human is also complex. But isolate a human from what? The complexity arises because humans can be separated from families, communities, or entire societies. For simplicity, focus on a human restricted from interacting with all other humans – a truly isolated human. The question to answer, then, is whether or not this type of isolated human can exist and still be a human. To Hannah Arendt, a human cannot exist isolated as such. This paper will cover and support Arendt's claims regarding humans in isolation and further analyze the multifaceted effects when humans attempt to isolate themselves. In particular, the most dangerous effects must be emphasized. Doing so highlights isolation's consequences on an innately interconnected humanity.

Prior to defending Arendt's stance, it is necessary to lay a framework of important terminology and establish certain scopes of definitions referenced in various texts. A human that is isolated has already been defined and the same definition will persist throughout the paper. By

¹ "How Much Water Is There on Earth? Completed." How Much Water is There on Earth? | U.S. Geological Survey. United States Geological Survey, November 13, 2019. <https://www.usgs.gov/special-topics/water-science-school/science/how-much-water-there-earth>.

utilizing an individual human with zero interaction from other individuals, the argumentation can be more conspicuous. Arendt includes references to nature, wilderness, and the world. Let the scope of such terms not be limited to just the Earth. Travel into space correlates with the natural universe that remains untouched by humans. Concepts of isolation derive fruitful discussions on subjects such as space exploration. Moreover, Arendt's definition of labor, work, and action respectively connect with isolation – as will be explained. *Vita activa*, or an active life, relies on the three components in Arendt's theories. Labor "...corresponds to the biological process of the human..." (Arendt 1958: 7).² Whereas, work "...corresponds to the unnaturalness of human existence... provid[ing] an 'artificial' world of things" with relation to the tools we create that interact with the world (Ibid.). Action is a key focus within this paper since it relies on human interaction in "plurality" (Ibid.). Plurality is the distinctness of humans; every human born is a unique being that never existed before. Likewise, the terms power and violence connect with both isolation and suffering. Power directly interacts with a "concert" of humans, not just an individual (Arendt 1970: 44).³ Power belongs to groups and their ability to act together as a combined unit. Violence is forcefully suppressing said power – taking away power from groups of individuals. More importantly, violence does not replace power. Although additional terminology in Arendt's texts exists, the ones critical to the isolation and suffering discussion have been covered and any minute definitions will be clarified as they appear.

It is necessary to fully interpret the Arendtian view on human isolation. Interpreting her view assists in understanding subsequent suffering. Early in *The Human Condition*, Arendt explicitly states that "no human life... is possible without a world which directly or indirectly

² Hannah Arendt (1958/1998). *The Human Condition*, 2nd Ed., Chicago: Chicago University Press.

³ Hannah Arendt (1970). *On Violence*, 1st Ed., San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.

testifies to the presence of other human beings” (Arendt 1958: 22). Including both direct and indirect presence aligns with the earlier proposed definition of a truly isolated human. Essentially, to be human fundamentally relies on other humans, whether through direct or indirect means. Even during lockdowns and quarantines, humans colloquially speak about being isolated from others; however, these cases are not true isolation. There remains an indirect connection to others regardless of the separation between individual humans’ physical bodies. In the case of modern quarantines, individuals can connect through remote interactions without the need for direct, physical interactions. Moreover, Arendt, in the very next line, continues that “all human activities are conditioned by the fact that men live together...” (Ibid.). Emphasis needs to be put on “human” within all of the claims by Arendt. Consider when men do not live together and are instead isolated. Arendt does not claim that no action is taking place. In such a case, no *human activities* occur. And from the prior reference, no *human life* is possible in worlds without direct or indirect interference from other humans. Sure, the individual entity that embodies a physical human being (biologically) can exist in a truly isolated realm from other congruent entities; though, such entities are not human by definition in Arendt’s theory. Such a firm claim demands equal justification.

A justification exists within her claim itself. “All human activities” include the fundamental labor, work, and action of humans. In an ideal Arendtian view, humans’ activities and what it means to be an unalienated human, in general, are tightly bound to the capacity to enact all three categories in *vita activa*. Conversely put, the presence of true human isolation deteriorates the significance of labor, work, and action in the overarching human condition. Arendt briefly covers labor and work’s reliance on non-isolation, but her claims can be expanded on. She accepts that isolated humans can labor and work, but in a very degraded sense, no longer humanlike. Labor, in her view, “does not need the presence of others, though being laboring in complete solitude would

not be human but an *animal laborans*...” (Arendt 1958: 22). The state of *animal laborans* is a “human being akin to a beast of burden, a drudge condemned to routine” and there is “unfreedom” —as Arendt describes— that expands when labor human life is engulfed solely by labor (Sennett 2008: 7).⁴ In an isolated state in nature, humans rely on more biological processes and become undifferentiable from other animals doing the same. Next, regarding work, “[m]an working ... only by himself... would have lost his specifically human quality and... be a god” (Arendt 1958: 22). If an isolated person can overcome an *animal laboran* burdened life of labor and begin doing work, he will be alone in such work. Recall that work embeds itself in the fabrication of an unnatural world. This “artificial” world has long-lasting durability compared to labor. Humanity’s work has fabricated the world we live in. With a sole creator, to Arendt, there would be no human world produced, and the creator would not be *homo faber*. Thus, labor and work have critical connections in tandem with isolation, and they lose their human quality when done in total seclusion. Finally, Arendt considers it hard to imagine action without a society of men. As described by Arendt, action has a much deeper dependency on human plurality and is unimaginable in isolation. “Action as distinguished from fabrication, is never possible in isolation...” (Arendt 1958: 188). Arendt’s theory has two specific components of action that play a significant role in why humans cannot have true isolation aligning with her claims on isolation.

The first component that makes absolute human solitude impossible relies on Arendt’s further discussions of human action having a nature of boundlessness. The topic of bounds describes the extent to which action extends to others. For every action, there is a consequential reaction from others. If a human is isolated, what other human can react to such an action? As

⁴ Richard Sennett (2008). *The Craftsman*, 1st Ed., New Haven & London: Yale University Press.

Arendt defines action as a human activity, it inherently needs the participation of more than one person. Therefore, no action can happen in a closed loop of a single isolated individual. Arendt additionally provides an argument that the cycle of actions and reactions can “never move in a closed circle and can never be reliably confined to two partners” because of the precondition of human plurality where distinct humans are capable of their own degree of reactions or responses (Arendt 1958: 190). To strengthen Arendt’s argument, consider her example of a hermit on an island isolated from the “outside world.” The boundlessness of other humans’ actions in this world and the permanence of the artificial world humanity has fabricated causes the actions others take to influence the hermit indirectly. Due to the boundlessness of human action, where action is a fundamental feature of the human condition, human isolation is impossible.

The second component of action that prevents human isolation in Arendt’s philosophy is based on the interconnectedness of humanity. Arendt describes such interconnectedness as a web. She dedicates an entire section in the action chapter to what she calls a “web of relationships.” Where the fabrication of work relies on contact with the physical world, action and speech contact with other peoples’ action and speech, forming a web between every action and speech. If treated like a web, where a connection instantly assembles between two (or more) individuals’ actions and speech, an innate need for human interactivity persists. It restricts the fact that action and speech must occur between more than one individual, making fully isolated individuals lack access to the human activity of action; therefore, the individual is no longer human. Recall that the biological being still exists, ontologically speaking; however, the being is not classified as human. An isolated individual can never craft into existence an arbitrary web of relationships either. The reason Arendt utilizes the term web is to convey the intangible quality that relationships produced by actions omit (Arendt 1958: 183).

Since the paper thus far established human isolation cannot exist in Arendtian philosophy, hypothetical examples assist in understanding the point further. Space exploration poses an intriguing perspective on isolation on the surface. In particular, an example of perceived isolation in space exemplifies why complete human isolation is impossible, even in the vast universe, due to the two components of action just covered. The reason for an example of space is because Arendt began *The Human Condition* by expressing concerns over humans' desire to leave our home planet in the prologue analyzing the Sputnik launch of 1957 (Arendt 1958: 1). Since then, space exploration has massively expanded and has recently gained further momentum with the rise of private space companies such as SpaceX, Blue Origin, etc. Within any proposed space exploration example where one discusses isolation, the hermit example looms, as it has similar features that omit actual, complete *human* isolation from taking place. The significant feature is the indirect (non-physical) interactions between the potentially isolated human and the rest of the interconnected society. When astronauts are in space, they have constant indirect actions with other humans based on Earth, such as mission control. Additionally, the required technology that the astronauts operate is built by hundreds, if not thousands, of engineers and scientists. The implicit web of action that takes place in constructing massive feats in technology depends on more than one individual reaching the collective, fabricated goal of achieving spaceflight with humans. An interesting aspect of Arendt's introduction of Sputnik and people wanting to leave Earth correlates with the second component of this paper, the attempt to isolate. Individuals wanting to escape Earth and/or society drive them toward an artificial push at isolation, even though a human cannot remain human when isolated. The repercussions of such require attention.

Alternative readings and interpretations of Arendt's text seem possible to support the contrary point: that human isolation may be possible; however, doing so fails to correspond with

Arendt's philosophy. It is difficult to bypass, in particular, the two components of action that prevent the isolation that was laid out. The only way to properly criticize the claims made is through an alternative reading of Arendt's text. With the interpretation outlined above, action must be both boundless and act as an interconnected web. Therefore, an opponent to the claim that isolation is not possible must assert that the boundlessness and the interconnected web of action are not required for the activity of action. The opponent might argue that Arendt is wrong in claiming that action is boundless and that gauging (or putting a bound) on an action's spread is possible. Doing so is difficult due to Arendt's restriction of plurality and her argument that "Since action acts upon beings who are capable of their own actions, reaction, apart from being a response, is always a new action that strikes out on its own and affects others. Thus action and reaction among men never move in a dosed circle and can never be reliably confined to two partners." (Arendt 1958: 190). Hence, an opposing view must completely fulfill a theory that explains a reliably confined two-way restricted action and reaction. Another route that is a more extreme stance is that one may go against Arendt altogether, by affirming that losing the ability to act maintains a human. This route requires the rejection of *vita activa* outright. The big question to answer then is: without action, what differentiates a human from other entities and how will the human condition be redefined in an entirely new theory?

Transitioning to the consequential suffering dilemma, Arendt's claim that a completely isolated human is no longer human stands firm, but partial isolation or an attempt at complete isolation persists. The overarching worry, then, is humans' attempt to isolate themselves, disregarding the fact that it is not possible to achieve true isolation. The attempt at isolating has detrimental effects, "...to be isolated is to be deprived of the capacity to act" (Arendt 1958: 188). Deprivation of action in isolation is a key factor that links this overall discussion of isolation to

suffering. The deprivation caused by isolation only occurs with action, not with labor or work; therefore, the remaining overview and analysis of Arendt's theory pivot on action specifically. Note that isolation does not deprive labor or work because neither labor nor work directly depend on multiple individuals to the extent that action does. Nevertheless, the notion of boundlessness becomes useful again when covering the consequential suffering caused by attempts to isolate. Every person's actions have a reaction. "To do and to suffer are like opposite sides of the same coin..." (Arendt 1958: 190). One might draw a false analogy from Newton's third law of motion to better understand Arendt's text here, "Whenever one object exerts a force on another object, the second object exerts an equal and opposite on the first" (NASA Glenn Research Center 2022).⁵ Replace "object" with a human and "force" with action to apply the analogy; however, due to plurality (and subsequent boundlessness), the exact measure of a reaction or suffering cannot be bounded – not exactly equal or opposite. The implication is that isolating has an irreparable consequence on others and can possibly affect all humans with how the web of interconnectedness is established among humans.

Further introspection must be made on why Arendt utilizes the term "suffer" in her discussion on action. She solidifies that humans that commit actions are actors, but "... he is never merely a 'doer' but always and at the same time a sufferer" (Arendt 1958: 190). Arendt's word choice here may be intentional. Utilizing "sufferer" puts a heavily negative connotation on the individual(s) that react to one's initial action. Something that is referenced throughout Arendt's texts and stems from other philosophers like Kant is the concept of spontaneity. Human spontaneity is linked to the plurality of humans because every unique human born is free to spontaneously

⁵ "Newton's Laws of Motion" NASA Glenn Research Center, October 27, 2022.
<https://www1.grc.nasa.gov/beginners-guide-to-aeronautics/newtons-laws-of-motion/>.

commit actions at their own will. Hence, this spontaneity can also be attributed to individuals committing negative actions. As a consequence, people's harmful or violent actions inadvertently act as a domino effect, leading to suffering spiraling out of control – beyond imagination in some cases. The use of “sufferer” also entrusts individuals to recognize their actions lead to suffering and gives importance to well-judged actions. People can directly suffer from the actions done by one or more people. Furthermore, since individuals are not just “doers” and instead are “sufferers,” then every action that one commits can lead to their own suffering. For instance, hurting another individual does not mean just doing a violent act on another person. Instead, both individuals suffer the consequences of violence.

Speaking of violence, it ties directly to Arendt's previously mentioned idea of isolation depriving the capacity for action. Action and speech cannot occur in isolation. Deprived actions correspond to the loss of power because power requires the collaboration of multiple individuals. More importantly, the resulting deprivation of action caused by isolation induces violence. Arendt argues that where there is a lack of power, there is an increase in violence, “Violence appears where power is in jeopardy, but left to its own course it ends in power's disappearance” (Arendt 1970: 56). If there is no power to begin with for an isolated individual, and they commit violent acts, a never-ending, vicious cycle of violence happens. An interesting point is that Arendt states, “Single men without others to support them never have enough power to use violence successfully... violence functions as the last resort...” (Arendt 1970: 51). Isolation leads to deprivation of action for the individual attempting to isolate, which weakens their power. When the isolated person enacts violence, they never have any success in achieving anything tangible.

Then why do individuals that obtain success off their own individual hard work receive praise? The answer to the question is that the perception of strength does not come from their

individuality. Oftentimes corrupt individuals and rulers leech on isolation since it gives them a false state of strength; Arendt calls this “...the fallacy of the strong man who is powerful because he is alone” (Arendt 1958: 190). All that this paper has covered up to this point encompasses that power cannot reside in an isolated individual. An isolated individual deprives themselves of the capacity to act and speak/communicate with others. Even in partial isolation, they weaken their connection to the masses which is where the real power lies. Recall that Arendt constantly reiterates that power depends on a “concert” of people, never on a single individual (Arendt 1970: 44). Individuals’ success must not be seen as powerful or praiseworthy when done without the human ability to act.

Theoretical analysis and hypothetical examples can only push the stance against isolation so far. It is critical to Arendt that philosophy needs to be practical concerning reality; there should not be a fixated theory for everything – the world is not an ideal, theorized reality. Instead, concrete, real-world instances with tangible concerns reveal the adverse consequences of suffering produced by attempts at isolation into the light. Arendt does so throughout her texts, pulling in historical and contemporary cases to pinpoint flaws and build her philosophy. The following examples might be critiqued under claims that the suffering is not solely derived from attempts at isolation; however, the focus is that attempts to isolate play a pivotal role in pain-inducing outcomes. Studying the three examples also gives insight into similarities in each case, mainly being isolation persists – albeit in varying degrees.

The most influential conflict affecting geopolitics at this moment is the invasion of Ukraine by Russia which began in February of 2022. At the head of this invasion, is President Vladimir Putin. The entire war is engulfed by violence with attempts to strip Ukraine’s sovereign power. By invading Ukraine with attempts to “reclaim” territory, citizens of Ukraine will no longer have the

same democratic powers. They openly attacked a nation and targeted its president. Russia's political sphere has drifted away from a fair democratic process where elections are often criticized. Additionally, Putin removed his own term limits, essentially preventing any successors to his regime under the guise of "stability" (Odynova 2021).⁶ Removing established term limits set in constitutions has proven to be a red flag in history. Putin directly embodies "the fallacy of the strong man" made by Arendt. Like many dictators/totalitarians covered in Arendt's texts, Putin is extremely paranoid about being overthrown. In a famous picture, Putin sits alone at the end of a massive conference table, afraid of being in close proximity to even his closest allies and advisors (Knowles 2022).⁷ Moreover, his violent actions by Putin have not gone unnoticed by the rest of the world, and the boundlessness of action is exemplified here where countries have reacted and most of the world's populace has suffered. Due to the global influence of Russia and its grip on energy production, many countries had to face rising energy prices which directly led to the covered topic of suffering. Though Putin has access to top-ranking military officials and government aids in the Kremlin, his personal distancing from personal relationships and reality draws similarities to totalitarian uprisings like those of Hitler and Stalin. Regardless of whether or not Putin is truly transforming Russia back into a totalitarian state, his isolation and refusal to meet with peaceful negotiations lead to inevitable suffering.

Isolated leaders like Putin are not uncommon in the current modern world. A prime example of a leader that has not only isolated himself, but also his country, is Kim Jong Un in North Korea. The suffering in North Korea for its citizens is a brutal representation of what

⁶ Odynova, Alexandra. "Putin Signs Law Allowing Him to Serve 2 More Terms as Russia's President." CBS News, April 5, 2021. <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/vladimir-putin-president-russia-signs-law-allowing-2-more-presidential-terms/>.

⁷ Knowles, David. "Photos: Putin Keeps His Distance during Meetings." Yahoo! News, February 28, 2022. <https://news.yahoo.com/photos-putin-keeps-his-distance-during-meetings-194633383.html>.

isolation leads to when inflicted on a large scale. The isolation that is happening in North Korea is an interesting case of isolation. Not only has Kim Jong Un isolated himself from his populace, but he has also distanced the entire country from the rest of the world. There are many counterarguments to globalization and its downsides; however, North Korea's leader has secluded the nation from any outside connections. The individual citizens of the nation lack power due to having a supreme leader rule over them politically (under a guise of democracy similar to Russia) while also being deprived of the capacity to escape to obtain power elsewhere in the world. The self-imposed isolation by North Korea's leader has led to scrutiny from the United Nations (UN), urging the country to cease isolation (OHCHR 2023).⁸ Violence is another factor combined with the isolation. The same UN report cites that violence toward women has rapidly increased since the country isolated and the population faces crises of starvation and even freezing to death (Ibid.). The isolation of the ruler of a nation, demanding further isolation of his people, has led to suffering that can easily be avoided by accepting assistance from outside nations' actions.

Another prime real-world example that has measurable consequences stemming from the isolation topic was the Coronavirus Pandemic. Although its effects are still being closely studied, there is enough information to hyper-focus on the dangers produced by partial isolation. Arguably, the attempt to isolate had positive intentions to safeguard society from a deadly virus that plagued the globe. However, the problems of interaction and deprivation of action remain. Leaning toward isolation often leads to loneliness. Humans are innately social creatures, and the human mind depends on social interactions. A consequence, then, is that mental concerns arise when individuals

⁸ "North Korea's Unparalleled Self-Isolation Must Cease: UN Expert." OHCHR, March 21, 2023. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2023/03/north-koreas-unparalleled-self-isolation-must-cease-un-expert>.

isolate, “[l]oneliness can... augment depression or anxiety” (Valtorta 2019).⁹ The increase in mental health problems can have extremely dangerous effects on society. For instance, “people diagnosed with depression were roughly three times more likely than the general population to commit violent crimes including robbery, sexual offenses, and assault” (Fazel, et al. 2015).¹⁰ Even though a majority of depressed individuals do not commit violent acts as mentioned, there is a significant correlation statistically speaking. Thus, it can be argued that isolation in general can be linked to loneliness and therefore mental problems resulting in added violence, producing suffering. The recent pandemic pushed more individuals toward a mostly isolated lifestyle with reduced capabilities of action. Note that the message here is not against safety precautions that protect the global population from deadly airborne viruses. Instead, the takeaway should be that the situation of global shutdowns that lead to partially depriving action needs practical and philosophical solutions to alleviate the negative outcomes. Some solutions that were implemented involved social distancing which allowed individuals to continue to have action capabilities; however, the rapid transition of locking down schools, businesses, and public gathering sites left some people more separated than others – and the fear factor of the virus played a role of halting certain individuals’ interactions with others.

Isolation for humans is impossible, and the most dangerous effects of modern attempts at isolation are terrifying with vicious consequences that result in avoidable suffering. The point of this paper was to unravel Arendt’s philosophy surrounding the impossibility of human isolation and analyze the consequential suffering born from isolation attempts. The next step is to answer

⁹ Novotney, Amy. “The Risks of Social Isolation.” *Monitor on Psychology*, May 2019.
<https://www.apa.org/monitor/2019/05/ce-corner-isolation>.

¹⁰ Fazel, Seena, Achim Wolf, Zheng Chang, Henrik Larsson, Guy M Goodwin, and Paul Lichtenstein. “Depression and Violence: A Swedish Population Study.” *The Lancet Psychiatry* 2, no. 3 (March 2015): 224–32.
[https://doi.org/10.1016/s2215-0366\(14\)00128-x](https://doi.org/10.1016/s2215-0366(14)00128-x).

the question of whether or not a solution exists to the problem. There likely is no clear-cut route that eradicates the damage done by attempts at isolation in a rapid manner; however, the first crucial step is to recognize that “the fallacy of the strong man” that Arendt outlined needs conquering from the masses. People must recognize that isolation does not equal strength. Depending on and collaborating with others is what makes one human because of our ability to act and have speech – it does not weaken our overall accomplishments, it instead strengthens them. When individuals act non-isolated and come together as collectives, there is more power available. It is tough to convince leaders who are falsely considered strong on their naive isolation because they cut connections to those close to them and ignore calls for unity. Because of technological advances in weaponry, individual leaders can act on a whim while being isolated from consultation to cause catastrophic destruction to all of humanity. It is paramount that individuals do not get deceived into letting leaders isolate and falsely claim absent power to themselves because no one person can have power. The power lies in the true collective, not in the false isolated.