

THE PLACE OF TECHNOLOGY IN THE POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY OF HANNAH ARENDT

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Abstract

Hannah Arendt contended that the question of technology is also a political question. It is, in a sense, a question of how human beings live and act together. It is, consequently, a matter of meaningful speech. In Arendt's view, politics is premised on the ability of human beings to talk with and make sense to each other and to themselves. These considerations raise the further question of action. Even if we were able to think what we were doing with regard to technology, would it be possible to act meaningfully on the deliberations of such thought? What is the relationship, in other words, not only of technology to thought but of technology to the character of political communities? Finally, returning to the question of technology-aided thinking, would such thought be politically consequential given that politics depends on meaningful speech? The response to all these questions and other concerns are the focus of this paper which concentrates its research on Arendt's work titled *The Human Condition*.

Keywords: Technology, Technology of Thought, Technology of the Character, Political Question.

Introduction

Hannah Arendt was a philosopher whose writings do not easily come together into a systematic philosophy that expounds and expands upon a single argument over a sequence of works. Instead, her thoughts span totalitarianism, revolution, the nature of freedom and the faculties of thought and judgment. Arendt, recognizes a common ground for politics to be the political arena, the polis, or the table that we gather around. Only in these places can humans practice politics because only in these "public realms" do humans experience the existence of others. Apart from this human plurality aspect of these public places, in order to be able to practice politics,

also a material space is required which is actively involved in the dynamics of how we do politics. In her book *The Human Condition*, she introduces “the table” as an analogy for that space, our shared political world; a table that relates people together with a common cause, but simultaneously separates them by sitting in their own chairs and having their own stances. According to Arendt, being human *is* being political, and we have to go out in public, take place at that table, and speak out. For her, this speaking out, or political action, is solely a human affair.

However, she emphasizes that political action can only take place between people, without the intermediary of things, (Arendt 1958 p.7). This is somewhat paradoxical because Arendt, herself, already shows how important technology is by illustrating how it mediates the ways in which we are present for each other. For example, she argues that if the table would suddenly cease to exist, the people gathered around it “would entirely be unrelated to each other by anything tangible (Arendt 1958 p.52-53).” The common cause that relates these people together would lose its place to be spoken, and people would lose the possibility to present themselves as distinctive human beings, in their own chairs. It should actually be possible to put things on the table.

Hence, my aim in this study is to identify to what degree technology (or materiality) plays a role in Hannah Arendt’s political philosophy. To do this, my major text for the study is Hannah Arendt’s *The Human Condition*. In this work, Hannah Arendt develops her political theory and mainly investigates life devoted to action namely; *vita activa*.

Distinction between *Vita Activa* and *Vita Contemplativa*

The Human Condition is fundamentally concerned with the problem of reasserting politics as a valuable realm of human action, praxis, and the world of appearances. Arendt argues that the Western philosophical tradition has devalued the world of human action which attends to appearances (the *vita activa*), subordinating it to the life of contemplation which concerns itself with essences and the eternal (the *vita contemplativa*).

In his article “*On Animal Laborans and Homo Politicus in Hannah Arendt*”, Levin (1979) makes an important observation claiming that the whole philosophy of Hannah Arendt is based on distinctions. He continues arguing that Hannah Arendt, because of this trait is very vulnerable for misinterpretation and misunderstanding (p.521). That is why, to understand what “politics” according to Arendt is, first one has to understand the main distinction Arendt makes related to human life, namely, the distinction between *vita contemplativa* and *vita activa*. Arendt (1990) explains where her distinction between *vita contemplativa* and *vita activa* comes from. She argues that it is the Platonic appraisal of the philosopher’s way of life that caused entanglement with the worldly affairs and politics. This philosopher’s way of life, is a life devoted to contemplation and speechless wonder. According to Arendt, *vita contemplativa* represents the philosopher’s way of life, a life of wonder. She refers to Plato’s work *Theaetetus*, which is a dialogue about the difference between *episteme* (knowledge) and *doxa* (opinion) and argues that in this dialogue, Plato defines the origin of philosophy as wonder, “as there is no other beginning of philosophy than wonder” . The wonder Plato believes to be the beginning of philosophy is not experienced for the sake of forming an opinion. Hence, it is so abstract and so general that it cannot be “related to words (97).” This wonder according to Arendt, does not relate to anything particular. The moment that this wonder translates itself into something particular, like words, Arendt argues that: “It will not begin with statements but will formulate in unending variations what we call the ultimate questions—What is being? Who is man? What meaning has life? What is death? All of which have in common that they cannot be answered scientifically.” (Arendt 1958 p. 98)

Dolan (2000) argues that, this endless wonder, necessitates a withdrawal from worldly affairs and public life. Arendt, according to Dolan, perceives this Platonic vision of what philosophy is, to be normative for Western political thought (263-264). While *vita contemplativa* is withdrawal from the world, public and political affairs, *vita activa* is the life devoted to them. In the Greek polis, citizens with their public speaking of words and public performance of deeds tried to leave a trace behind. Since human life has an end,

they sought immortality with their actions, leaving a story behind to be told to later generations. So, for Arendt, *vita activa* is the political way of life. While *vita contemplativa* is concerned with seeking truth, *vita activa* is concerned with opinion. According to Arendt, this opinion or *doxa*, as the Greeks would call it, is also one's positioning in the world. So, the world as it is, opens itself differently to every human, according to his or her position in the world. According to Arendt, the word "doxa" not only means opinion, but also splendor or fame (Arendt, 1990 p. 80). *Doxa*, here, means the opinions of others. Because humans seek recognition or approval of others, they seek the opinions of others. So, Arendt argues, *doxa* is related to the political realm. In the public sphere, where the political realm is, one can appear and show who he/she is. She argues that: "To assert one's own opinion belonged to being able to show oneself, to be seen and heard by others. To the Greeks this was the one great privilege attached to public life and lacking in the privacy of the household, where one is neither seen nor heard by others... In private life one is hidden and can neither appear nor shine, and consequently no *doxa* is possible there (80-81)." Opinion then, belongs to the public realm.

Truth however requires isolation and a withdrawal from the public realm. Hence, the moment truth enters the public realm, it loses its distinguishing quality and becomes an opinion among other opinions. Truth, according to Arendt, is not relevant to politics. Arendt argues that, after the disappearance of the ancient city-state, the term *vita active* (life devoted to politics) lost its specifically political meaning and meant all kinds of active engagements with the things of the world (p.14). With this change in the meaning, the hierarchical order within *vita activa* also changed. Action before this change in the meaning, had the highest rank among the activities within *vita activa*, but after the loss of the political meaning of the term *vita activa*, action found itself being among the necessities of earthly life where contemplation started being understood as the "only, truly, free way to live (Arendt 1958 p.14)." Arendt argues that the traditional hierarchy has given an enormous weight to *vita contemplativa* – the philosopher's way of life, over *vita activa* (active life) and this "has blurred the distinctions and articulations

within the *vita activa* itself and that, appearances notwithstanding, this condition has not been changed essentially.” (Arendt 1958 p.17) What she means by the “traditional hierarchy” is the hierarchy within the Western tradition of political thought. In the Pre-Socratic city states, *vita activa* was the highest way of living. This hierarchy was reversed and a whole new tradition emerged after the trial of Socrates. According to Arendt, this Western tradition of political thought is: “...far from comprehending and conceptualizing all the political experiences of Western mankind, grew out of a specific historical constellation: the trial of Socrates and the conflict between the philosopher and the polis. It eliminated many experiences of an earlier past that were irrelevant to its immediate political purposes and proceeded until it sent, in the work of Karl Marx, in a highly selective manner.” (Arendt 1958 p.12)

The contemplative way of life, for Arendt, seeks to understand the realm of human affairs from a philosophical perspective. What she seeks to establish through her quest is to understand that realm from a political perspective. Arendt has contended to the distinction between *vita activa* and *vita contemplativa* all her life, both important and complementary of one another for her. What Arendt was focusing on was not looking at how we are thinking, but “thinking what we are doing”, namely, bringing thinking into the world of experiences. In her own words, her attempt is “...very simple: it is nothing more than to think what we are doing.” (Arendt 1958 p.5) It is of course important to mention that Arendt was moved and influenced by the events of twentieth century as a Jew from Germany. She saw a rupture in western traditional thinking caused by the emergence of totalitarianism. For her, the events people experienced could not be understood with the existing traditional attitude towards the world. This break in tradition caused Arendt to search for a new and original approach to politics. She stood against the contemplative approach of “being in the world” and defended the idea that people are not only in the world but “of” it. This is where the story of “*vita activa*” starts for Hannah Arendt. She proposes to look back to the ancient Greek city state, namely the polis, to understand the significance of action and public realm. She is not a romantic longing for going back to the roots; she tries to

bring back the lost authentic public realm into life via new interpretations and meanings attained to it. She seeks to restore the past in the modern world and she believes this cannot be done with the guidance of the anti-political traditional approach that praises withdrawal from the world, but with a guidance of a political approach.

The *Vita Activa*: Labor, Work and Action

In *The Human Condition*, Arendt argues for a tripartite division between the human activities of labor, work, and action. Moreover, she arranges these activities in an ascending hierarchy of importance, and identifies the overturning of this hierarchy as central to the eclipse of political freedom and responsibility which, for her, has come to characterize the modern age.

Labor: Humanity as *Animal Laborans*

Labor is that activity which corresponds to the biological processes and necessities of human existence, the practices which are necessary for the maintenance of life itself. Labor is distinguished by its never-ending character; it creates nothing of permanence, its efforts are quickly consumed, and must therefore be perpetually renewed so as to sustain life. In this aspect of its existence, humanity is closest to the animals and so, in a significant sense, the least human. Indeed, Arendt (1958) refers to humanity in this mode as ‘animal laborans’. She states:

...all human activities which arise out of the necessity to cope with them are bound to the recurring cycles of nature and have in themselves no beginning and no end, properly speaking; 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 (p.98)

Because the activity of labor is commanded by necessity, the human being as laborer is the equivalent of a slave; labor is characterized by

lack of freedom. Arendt argues that it is precisely the recognition of labor as contrary to freedom, and thus to what is distinctively human, which underlay the institution of slavery amongst the ancient Greeks; it was the attempt to exclude labor from the conditions of human life.

Mary G. Dietz (2000) in her essay “Arendt and the Holocaust”, summarizes the concepts that characterizes labour in the following multifarious elements:

the blessings of life as a whole, nature, animality, life process, (human) biology, (human) metabolism, fertility, birth, reproduction, childbirth, femaleness, cyclicity, circularity, seasons, necessity, basic life-needs (food, clothing, shelter), certain kinds of toil, repetition, everyday function (eating, cleaning, mending, washing, cooking, resting, etc.), housework, the domestic sphere, abundance, consumerism, privatization, purposeless regularity, the society of jobholders, automation, technological determinism, routinization, relentless repetition, automatism, regularization, non-utilitarian process, dehumanization processes, devouring process, painful exhaustion, waste recyclability, destruction (of nature, body, fertility), and deathlessness (p.96).

That means that labour is natural in contrast to work, which superimposes human world upon the earth and therefore corresponds to the unnaturalness of human existence. It is dictated primarily by man’s biological needs. Labour refers to the class of activities whose *raison d’être* is to save life. It is the activity by which the human agent wrests from nature the necessities without which his or her continued biological existence is impossible. The animal laborans – human being as one species of animals is then a part of nature with its casually determined process, driven by bodily needs and tending to nature, according to Arendt is a realm without genuine beginning or ending.

Labour is thus concerned with producing, and then immediately involved in consuming – food, clothes, and other things that temporarily meet the exigencies of biological life. Arendt reappropriates “Marx’s definition of labour as man’s metabolism with nature” in whose process nature’s material is adapted by a change of form to the wants of man so that labour has incorporated itself with its subject. The validity of this characterization, resides in the fact that it allows us to conceive labour in terms of physiological description wherein labour consumption are but two stages of the ever-recurring cycle of biological life. This cycle needs to be sustained through consumption, and the activity, which provides the means of consumption is laboring. Hence, what comes to the forefront of the description and analysis is the destruction, devouring aspect of the labour activity. Because laboring has its character, it is essentially blind to anything but itself, and it is set in motion not by specific sight but by the imperious wants of our bodies. In this activity therefore, no phenomenal character is ever restrained, since whatever labour concerns itself with, it also destroys and does not let be. And Gendre (1992) underscores this point when he remarks:

Consequently, Arendt allows us to note that the anti-phenomenal character of destruction and metabolic incorporation is visible only from the standpoint of the world, and in distinction from work, which does not prepare matter for in-corporation but changes it into material in order to work upon it and use the finished product ... The activity of labour is simply viewed as a photographic negative when contrasted with work (p.37).

So, labour simply keeps the species going without building any human world or revealing human plurality necessary for freedom. Therefore, it has a biological, but not a political, dimension.

Work: Humanity as *Homo Faber*

We have noted that labour consists in the endless repetitive inescapable service of biological necessity. Through work, man realizes a world that shields him from bare natural surroundings

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thereby offering man an “artificial” world of things. Arendt’s (1958)
definition of work brings this out very clearly:

Work is the activity which corresponds to the naturalness 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 ... the human condition of work is worldliness (p.7).

However, Arendt admits that her distinction between work and labour is unusual. It is obviously foreign to the Hegelian/Marxian tradition. But she believes that the phenomenal evidence for such a distinction compensates more for the lack of theoretical attention it has received. The main difference is rooted in the virtually pre-human character of labour. Work, in contrast to labour, is a distinctively human activity. Work is the production of things rather than consumption. So, the distinguishing characteristic of work is its purposiveness. All work aims at the creation of a durable, lasting product and so possesses directionality, a teleological quality that is utterly absent from labour. Work is essentially instrumental in character. Moreover, “the fabricated thing is an end-product in the twofold sense that the production process comes to an end in it and that it is only a means to produce this end.” (Arendt 1958 p. 142) The achievement of a lasting result, an end, separates work from the circularity and necessity of the labour process. “To have a definite beginning and a definite predictable end is the mark of fabrication which through this characteristic also distinguishes itself from all other human activities.” (Arendt 1958 p. 143-144)

But the question is, does not labour, after all, have an end, the reproduction of the individual and the species? May we not also regard it as purposive? Well, we can see that what distinguishes work from labour is the imposed character of the end it achieves. For example, the making of a table is not dictated by nature, but rather it is imposed on it, work or fabrication, for this reason, is inherently violent. “Violence is present in all fabrication, and homo faber, the

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creator of the human artifice, has always been the destroyer of nature
(Arendt 1958 p. 139).”

If labor relates to the natural and biologically necessitated dimension of human existence, then work is the activity which corresponds to the unnaturalness of human existence, which is not embedded in, and whose mortality is not compensated by, the species’ ever-recurring life-cycle. She posits it thus:

...against the subjectivity of men stands the objectivity of the man-made world rather than the sublime indifference of an untouched nature, whose overwhelming elementary force, on the contrary, will compel them to swing relentlessly in the circle of their own biological movement, which fits so closely into the over-all cyclical movement of nature's household (Arendt 1958 p. 137).

Work (as both *technê* and *poiesis*) corresponds to the fabrication of an artificial world of things – artifacts which endure temporally beyond the act of creation itself. According to Arendt, work provides an “artificial world of things, distinctly different from all natural surroundings (Arendt 1958 p. 7).” It creates borders, and houses for each individual life. Apart from the mortal humans, the world, which is the product of work lasts human life and transcends them all (Arendt 1958 p. 7). Work thus creates a world distinct from anything given in nature, a world distinguished by its durability, its semi-permanence and relative independence from the individual actors and acts which call it into being. Humanity in this mode of its activity, Arendt names ‘*homo faber*’. *Homo faber*'s typical representatives are the builder, the architect, the craftsperson, the artist and the legislator, as they create the public world both physically and institutionally by constructing buildings and making laws. Work then destroys nature through its creation of artifacts. So, the products of work which Arendt calls “reification” do not find their way back into the cycle of natural growth and decay, but endure outside it. It is the *homo faber*, man as craftsman who builds the world, not man as the labourer. Hence, in Arendt’s view, work is the only genuine embodiment of a human negativity. *Homo faber*

acts into nature and transforms it into something stable, solid, a man-made home. She describes the activity of work as a rupture with temporal cycle of nature. Jacque Taminiaux (1999) referring to this writes:

Thanks to this rupture, work makes possible the emergence of an enduring world beyond the natural cycle. The world is composed of artefacts. It has a thinly solidity whose durability allows the mortal beings who dwell in it to acquire the consistency of a unique identity, of an individual biography which as a linear sequence between birth and death, is not absorbed in the eternal return of the same which characterizes the biological realm (p. 44).

It is on the basis of this stability that a specifically human life, a life removed from the ceaseless motion of nature becomes possible. However, in Arendt's understanding, the world created by work does not subsume nature; but instead, it stands between nature and humanity. It provides a distance from what is natural. And distance is necessary if we are to know or manipulate nature. But for her, the world of artifice is not in itself a space of freedom nor is the activity that creates itself contained. Also she talks of the negative effects of the development of machines. The purpose she maintains has been to turn more and more craftsmen into labourers, and more and more objects into articles of consumption, thereby reducing the permanence and durability of the world by which we are surrounded until it no longer provides a lasting home for human beings. However, one outstanding characteristic of work as opposed to labour is that it is an inherently solitary activity. In the modern world, the only "remaining domain of work as opposed to labour is the creation of works of art (Canovan 1992 p. 56)." From what we have discussed on work, we can see clearly that the human condition of work is really worldliness. Just as Shiraz Dossa (1980) puts it:

In Arendt's theory, the political status of homo faber is less clear because he is not trapped in the realm of privacy like animal laborans. The privacy required

by him to create is balanced by his eventual need to show his objects in public and to the public. Homo faber's public character though limited, obviously appeals to Arendt, more so because the world as an objective artifact is his achievement (62).

Action: Humanity as Zoon *Politikon*

From what we have seen so far, labour is the activity to which men are doomed by biological necessity – the need to stay alive. Man as labourer becomes a producer and consumer. So, labour meets the needs essential for the maintenance of man's physical existence. But by virtue of its necessary quality, it occupies the lowest rung on the hierarchy of *vita activa*. Work, on the other hand, is the condition of civilized existence, the domination of nature in order to create according to human design a world over and against nature in which humans can live and be at home. In politics, by contrast, our humanity gives us the chance to transcend the merely natural and to undertake unique initiatives that come out in public realm and linger indefinitely in memory and history. Based on this (the contrast between life-process and politics), it follows that the sense in which we are political animals must be quite special for Arendt. In ordinary usage of the language, we call someone a political animal if he is hungry for power, and if he has the knack of manipulating people and institutions to get out of them exactly what he wants (if it is a question of funding or promotion, he knows whom to talk to, and gets to them first). In another note, we call someone a political animal if he has a talent for politicizing everything. For example, things that other people will normally treat informally, he makes a political issue of it. Finally, to say that somebody is a political animal is to marvel at the way he struts his stuff on the political stage; it is to be dazzled by his speeches or his maneuvers as pure performance as drama.

Actually, we are not sure any of them would qualify as a political animal in Arendt's understanding. In Arendt's view, a political animal is not someone who politicizes everything, or who can manipulate institutions to his personal advantage. In any case, the central case of an Arendtian *zoon politikon* is a person who engages

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seriously and responsibly in public business under the auspices of
public institutions:

He has the judgment to discern which issues are political and which are merely social or personal. He can see that what matters in politics are interests and purposes that are shared by all as agents in a community. He has the patience to listen to others and to respond to their intelligence in a way that treats them as equals. Above all, he has respect for the structures and procedures that frame the political enterprise and that make possible deliberation and action with others. He takes the framework seriously, and he resists the temptation to dazzle his audience or further his own aims by subverting the formalities it imposes. (Waldron, 2000 p. 202)

We can summarize the above passage in a few words: he is a man of action. But we see that action, the third and highest of Arendt's categories of human activity is not all that easy to describe. The kind of activity the term is likely to suggest to the modern reader is that of the 'man of action', the seeker of adventure, who probably engages in violence. Nonetheless, action in her sense is not equivalent to violence, and is indeed disassociated from it completely. Action she tells us, is the political activity par excellence because it is "the only activity that goes on directly between men without the intermediary of things or matters, corresponds to the human condition of plurality, to the fact that men, not man, live on earth and inhabit the world (p.7)."

So, while all other aspects of the human condition are somehow related to politics, this plurality is specifically the condition not only the condition sine qua non, but the condition per quam of all political life. However, her concept of action carries with it a multitude of dimensions and meanings. In fact, it is the sum of the following multifarious elements:

the web of human relationships, the realm of human affairs, the space of appearance, being together in the presence of others, being seen and heard by others, the sharing of word and deeds, the spontaneous beginnings of something new, plurality, equality, sameness in utter diversity, self-revelation through speech, the disclosure of the agent in the act, the appearance of 'who' someone is, the active revelation of unique personal identity, the distinctiveness of each human person, courage, boldness, esteem, dignity, endurance, the shining brightness once called glory, the human capacity for power generated by action in concert, the human capacity to freedom born of acting, the distinctly human condition of living on earth and inhabiting the world (Dietz p. 100).

The fundamental defining quality of action is its in-eliminable freedom, its status as an end in itself and, so, as subordinate to nothing outside itself. To act, in its most general sense, means to take initiative, to begin (as the Greek word 'archein', 'to begin, "to lead,' and eventually 'to rule' indicates), to set something in motion. Human plurality for Arendt is "*the condition – not only the *conditio sine qua non* but the *conditio per quam* – of all political life (Arendt 1958 p.7) because of its two characteristics such as equality and uniqueness. These two characteristics form the basis of action and speech. For Arendt, "A life without speech and without action...is literally dead to the world; it has ceased to be a human life because it is no longer lived among men (Arendt 1958 p. 176)." For Arendt, "to act, in its more general sense, means to take an initiative, to begin..., to set something into motion." (Arendt 1958 p. 177)*

The Technological Mediations in Arendt's Work

Hannah Arendt already starts talking about the interdependent relation between things and the human condition in the beginning of *The Human Condition*. She indicates that:

The impact of the world's reality upon human existence is felt and received as a conditioning force. The objectivity of the world – its object or thing character – and the human condition supplement each other because human existence is conditioned existence, it would be impossible without things, and things would be a heap of unrelated articles, a non-world, if there were not the conditioners of human existence (p. 9).

What Arendt argues in this passage above is that, there is indeed interdependency between the human condition and the world itself. Here, it is important to understand that for Arendt, world and earth are not the same. When she talks about a world, she talks about an objective world of man-made objects. Canovan (1992) argues that this world-earth distinction in Arendt points out to the “home that men have made for themselves” to live and “the natural environment which they belong to” as biological creatures (p. 106). For Arendt, there are two aspects of human beings: on the one hand we are biological creatures with biological needs as a member of animal species; on the other hand, human beings do create the conditions of life that is naturally given to them, by constructing a “world of their own over and above the natural earth (Canovan p. 106).” That is why, world which humans constructed themselves is not the natural earth. This also relates back to Arendt's understanding of nature which is not only cyclical evolving around birth, death, growth and decay but also imposing itself on humans. For this reason, human beings build a world of stable things, which would stand, and protect them against this cycle of “biological movement (p. 107)”

Without the world, however, human beings would not be able to know others, only with the stability of the human world, human beings can appear as distinct individuals (p.106). Because “men, live and inhabit the world” they need tangible things like houses, artifacts and a stable environment. Canovan argues that, if human beings don't inhabit a man-made world as well as living on the natural earth, it is unlikely for human beings to be fully human since then, they would not have a space for appearance (p. 107).

This space however does not exist in nature in itself, it is artificial and durable, created by transforming nature into durable things which can outlast human lives. The world, which humans share with others, not only gives humans a space to express themselves as distinct individuals, but also allows them to perceive others' positions and "see their world from different points of view. (p. 107) This "world" which is the work of *homo faber* and its relation to human condition of action is the main concern of this section. It is very interesting to observe in Arendt that, while she makes it very clear that man-made world is the necessary condition for action to take place in her book, she also argues that action is the only activity that takes place between men without the intermediary of things. It is surprising that she oversees her own argument about this interdependent relationship between the world and human condition of action. In the following sections I will analyze this relation further.

Arendt and her Critique of Modernity

Arendt in her prologue to her book *The Human Condition* talks about the first man-made object which challenged the limits of the earth having been sent to the universe, circling the earth according to the physical laws. This man-made object is the satellite, 'Sputnik', which was sent to the universe in 1957. For Arendt, this event was one of the most important events of the 20th century since, for the first time, mankind was able to look at the "earth from a cosmic perspective (Arendt 1958 P. XV)." This launch of the satellite also was the first step for human beings to "escape from men's imprisonment to the earth" as one of Russia's great scientists said (Arendt 1958 P. 1). Arendt thinks that the reason for this will to escape the earth, is the result of rapid scientific advancement where science accomplished things that humans were not capable of imagining and human beings were not only fast to adjust to those developments, they also out-spiced them. (Arendt 1958 P. 1). This for Arendt, is an important will, since for her the earth, is the "quintessence of human condition." (Arendt 1958 P. 2) We create the world of man-made objects to shelter us and separate us from

animals but we are always related to other living organisms (Arendt 1958 P. 2).

These new scientific developments can lead to a destruction of all organic life around us, the question whether we want to do this or not for Arendt is not a scientific but a political question (P. 3). The reason for these scientific developments to assume a political significance for Arendt is that these scientific developments present a “truth”. This “truth” does not need speech or thought to demonstrate themselves as truths anymore; they can be proven to be true mathematically or technologically. The loss of speech for Arendt can cause us to be the dwellers in this earth; we can do things, but we would not be able to speak about them. Humanity has not reached this point yet, Arendt argues, but it can lead to humans needing machinery to do the thinking and speaking for them. The possible loss of speech is of political significance for Arendt since it is “speech...that makes man a political being.” (Arendt 1958 P. 3)

The questions that arise here then are: what made Arendt think that these scientific developments would lead to a loss of speech? What is it that made Arendt start her book on Human Condition with a technological advancement? The answer to this question lies in her criticism on modernity. For Arendt, the invention of the telescope is among the most influential three great events of modernity. The discovery of America, Reformation and the invention of telescope according to Arendt, determined the character of the modern age. This invention, followed by the development of a new science, changed the way we think and act and this change did not reach its final point for Arendt; it still continues (Arendt 1958 p. 248). With the telescope, humans started looking at the globe through an instrument, which was adjusted to human senses for them to be able to grasp what is beyond vision, it created a new vision, a new understanding of the earth and the beyond (Arendt 1958 p. 257-258). With this invention of Galileo, the unknown, the universe, was made possible to be perceived by humans with their sensory perceptions, “with the certainty of sense-perception (Arendt 1958 p. 260)” humans, the earth-bound creatures with their body bound senses have discovered an Archimedean point to look at what was

speculation and imagination to them. (Arendt 1958 p. 261). Arendt argues that with the telescope, we realized that our senses could indeed betray us and we cannot reach reality with our bodily senses. It also made possible the Archimedean wish for a point outside the earth to solve the mysteries of it. After this discovery of the Archimedean point that was made possible by the telescope, in whatever we do today in physics, Arendt continues, “we always handle nature from a point in the universe outside the earth.” (Arendt 1958 p. 262)

This technology then, enabled humans to act on earth “within the terrestrial nature as though we dispose of it from outside...” (Arendt 1958 p.262) We started thinking and seeing that neither earth nor the sun is the centers of the universe. We are not bound to anything, not even the sun, we move freely in the universe. This, Arendt concludes, caused a shift in the geocentric worldview to a heliocentric worldview (Arendt 1958 p. 263). With the discovery of this Archimedean point, human beings were able to map the earth’s lands, where every river, every mountain lies became known. This mapping of the whole earth, for Arendt, made it possible for humans to know where what is, and this caused shrinkage in the world (Arendt 1958 p. 250). She continues:“...effective shrinkage which comes about through the surveying capacity of the human mind, whose use of numbers, symbols, and models can condense and scale earthly physical distance down to the size of the human body's natural sense and understanding. Before we knew how to circle the earth, how to circumscribe the sphere of human habitation in days and hours, we had brought the globe into our living rooms to be touched by our hands and swirled before our eyes.” (Arendt 1958 p.251)

This modern scientific change in the worldview, and the earth becoming smaller for us in terms of distance also caused a change in human’s perception of the world. Only with these new developments human beings were able to establish themselves not as earthly beings but “universal” beings. This perception, that recognizes humans as universal beings, transformed humans from an inhabitant of a country, of a city, of a land to an inhabitant of the world. This

has a very negative meaning for Arendt in contrary to what we would think as a positive change. The reason for Arendt's discontent lies in her conviction that if humans disentangle themselves from the close at hand, if they are not involved and not concerned with their surroundings, they would withdraw themselves from everything near them (p. 251).

Aside the telescope, there was another technology that caused the shrinkage of the earth according to Arendt. That technology is the airplane. For Arendt, airplane allowed people to travel far distances in a short time and this was done for the price of "putting a decisive distance between man and earth." (Arendt 1958 p. 251) This advancement caused humans to be alienated from their "immediate surroundings." (Arendt 1958 p. 251) Against Marx's famous self-alienation thesis, Arendt argues that the hallmark of the modern age is the world-alienation of humans, not self-alienation. According to her, this world-alienation happens from the earth into the universe and from the world into the self (Arendt, 1958 p. 6). World alienation occurred because, humans started concerning themselves with the unknown, the places that they have not seen and been to instead of concerning about their neighborhood and their own community.

Galileo's telescope not only was the pioneer of the world alienation but also "the earth alienation". This second type of alienation is the emergence of a new science and the rise of Cartesian doubt in philosophy. Earth alienation, according to Arendt, is not just looking at the world but also acting on it, dominating it, reducing the world into mathematical calculations, not waiting for nature to reveal itself but manipulating it with experiments. Here, Arendt shows a very Heideggerian approach to the impact of technology. Heidegger also believes that nature brings itself forth, and, humans, by manipulating it, reduces it to something like a standing reserve, something ready-at-hand to be used when it is necessary. With this new world-view human beings started instrumentalizing nature and Arendt seems to base her earth alienation thesis on this idea of Heidegger. Arendt argues that while world alienation became the hallmark of modern

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society, earth alienation became the hallmark of modern science that we continue to observe even today (Arendt 1958 p. 254).

Arendt indicates that: “Only we, and we only for hardly more than a few decades, have come to live in a world thoroughly determined by a science and a technology whose objective truth and practical know-how are derived from cosmic and universal, as distinguished from terrestrial and "natural," laws, and in which a knowledge acquired by selecting a point of reference outside the earth is applied to earthly nature and the human artifice.” (Arendt 1958 p. 268)

This discovery of the Archimedean point enabled humans to create their own stars Arendt says referring to the satellites, humans created their own heavenly bodies where they constantly examine and look beyond their imagination. According to Arendt, these developments caused a change in the word “universal”, in this new world, this word according to Arendt, gained a meaning as “valid beyond our solar system”. For Arendt, the word “universal” is not the only word that had a change in meaning in light of the new developments in sciences. The word “absolute” also gained a new meaning with its use next to time, speed or motion. This word now, began to indicate relative, since “everything happening on earth has become relative since the earth's relatedness to the universe became the point of reference for all measurements (Arendt 1958 p. 270).” With this new science Arendt indicates, for the first time in history, science and philosophy are separated from each other radically. This separation started with Descartes’s philosophy, a philosophy that its emergence was almost inescapable if one understands the implications of the modern world.

The Cartesian doubt emerged as a result of this modern world-view. Cartesian doubt, doubts the reality itself, it does not trust neither the human senses nor the reason. Nothing can be trusted to be the truth, we cannot be certain of anything. Arendt argues that Descartes was convinced that “though our mind is not the measure of things or of truth, it must assuredly be the measure of things that we affirm or deny (Arendt 1958 p. 279)” This idea of Descartes influenced modern scientists and enabled them to understand man as the

measure of all things, even though there is not truth or certainty, man can be truthful and reliable. This new man, the measure of all things, is involved only with himself, the objective reality of the world, dissolves into a subjective state of mind. Arendt indicates that this Cartesian doubt caused humans “as an *animal rationale*” to acquire “a terrible precision: deprived of the sense through which man's five animal senses are fitted into a world common to all men, human beings are indeed no more than animals who are able to reason.” (Arendt 1958 p. 284) The truth demonstrated by the technologies is not more than a demonstration that the results of man’s mind can be applied to real world objects.

It is important to ask the question why are these new scientific and philosophical worldviews are so important for Arendt? What is the significance of this technological advancement in modern times in relation to politics itself? The answer is very clear for Arendt. These scientific developments caused a reversal within the hierarchy of *Vita Activa*. This new science undermined the status of contemplation, truth became something that cannot be found in engaging with deep thought, it became something that can only be found by doing things. Canovan (1992) argues that one might expect that an active life to have more value in light of this new worldview caused by the new sciences (p. 152). But the opposite happened. The value attained to an active life by the new sciences was not referring to what Arendt calls action, but was referring to the lowest human condition within the hierarchy of *Vita Activa*, that is labour. Arendt starts to unravel this reversal within *Vita Activa* with explaining the victory of *homo faber* since for her, *homo faber* was the first triumphant of this reversal. The work of *homo faber* was valuable since with this creativity and talent to turn what is natural into objects, was essential to trap nature and make experiments.

The problem here according to Arendt is not the fact that *homo faber*'s creation of worldly objects, since that is what *homo faber* does to provide a stable and durable environment for humans, the problem is, *homo faber* with the new world view, repeats endlessly what he creates where there is no use for it. Not the ideas, models or

shapes to come were the concern but the process in which these artifacts are realized. *Homo faber* according to Arendt is utilitarian and manipulates nature, produces and creates materials from it, and the value of these products could only be measured with their utility. The problem here is, with the new world view, this concept of valuing things according to their utility was transferred to valuing the process that brings these objects into being. If, Arendt continues, these worldly objects are not valued in terms of their usefulness but unintended results of a production process, then the end result of the production process that is the product itself loses its all meaning (Arendt 1958 p. 308). This leads to a new definition of *homo faber* and turns him/her into the builder of human artifice who accidentally invents tools rather than being *homo faber*, the maker of objects. If this principle of utility of *homo faber* is applied not the worldly objects but to the production process, it turns the definition of what useful is towards things that stimulate productivity and lessens pain and effort. So the standard measurement shifts from utility or usage to happiness, “that is, the amount of pain and pleasure experienced in the production or consumption of things.” (Arendt 1958 p 309)

This leads to a translation of *homo faber*'s values into the values of *animal laborans*, the subjective experiences, the pain and pleasure of humans, in other words, the “sheer biological life, becomes the highest good (Canovan p. 153)”. The victory of *animal laborans* according to Hannah Arendt, was not only a result caused by the new scientific developments or the Cartesian doubt but also by the influence of Christianity. Cartesian doubt, caused humans to doubt even their own existence, humans were withdrawn from the world itself, when this is combined with the appropriation of the eternal life, the life beyond the world, then the immortality that humans seek with their public performance of deeds and public speaking of words loses all of its value. So, action, loses its high rank within the hierarchy of *vita activa*, and *animal laborans*, declares its victory.

But then, what does it bring us to? The victory of *animal laborans*, brought the rise of the social, that is the last stage of the laboring society, the society of jobholders. The problem with the victory of *animal laborans* according to Arendt is that, labor, is an anti-

political activity. While laboring, humans are neither with the world, nor with one another but alone with their body, taking care of necessities. *Animal laborans*, of course is living in a world where others are present, but one cannot call this human plurality, it is rather like eating and drinking in company of others. Laboring, is same to all, a society, where everybody labors and consumes leads to an experience of laboring together, “where the biological rhythm of labor unites the group of laborers to the point that each may feel that he is no longer an individual but actually one with all others.” (Arendt 1958 p. 214)

In the society of *animal laborans*, all individuality is submerged in the over-all life process of the species. With the victory of *animal laborans*, where there is no plurality but sameness, Arendt’s biggest fear, mass society comes to existence. The new scientific developments, the rise of Cartesian doubt and Christianity led to the marginalization human beings, they ended up turning into a species of animal. Canovan argues that whole modernity critique of Arendt, is related to her reading of totalitarianism. Totalitarianism for Arendt, was “an entirely characteristic product of modernity.” (Canovan p. 154) What Arendt calls for in her entire book, repeatedly is to realize the human condition of plurality instead of modernity’s homogeneity. It is plurality that enables humans to appear as a unique individual instead of a species of animals. Humans escape their lonely imagination and experience reality in a world that is shared with others and even build the world among each other. When humans are with one another, they are not doomed to mortality but there is always someone remembering and passing on their story. That is why, for Arendt, the Greek Polis is of great importance because it is the world, where human plurality is actualized.

Arendt and the Greek Polis

Throughout *The Human Condition*, Arendt goes back and forth to the ancient Greek Polis, which is also interpreted as a nostalgia for a better world. In the Greek polis, citizens enjoyed their freedoms such as freedom of speech and thought. Canovan, argues that this freedom of speech is not freedom expression as we would understand today

but, freedom to “grasp reality by moving about between the different perspectives from which plural men view their common world.” (Canovan p. 112-113) The political realm, then, arises directly out of public performance of deeds and public speaking of words; in other words, from acting together. Arendt indicates that action is the only activity that constitutes the public aspect of the world. She argues that with action, one defines a place to be public. She states:

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...that action and speech create a space between the participants which can find its proper location almost anytime and anywhere. 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, exist not merely like other living or inanimate things but make their appearance explicitly (Arendt 1958 p. 198-199).

This account of polis or the public space provides room for understanding the public space as a space of appearance where men gather and discuss. However, Arendt also makes it explicit that there should be a physical divide to the polis as well. She even argues that: “the organization of polis is secured by the wall around the city...” (Arendt 1958 p. 198) So, there should be a physical demarcation between the public and the private sphere. It is not that where everyman gathers and discusses is a public space, but there is a physical, material aspect to it. Without the materiality, a world of stable durable things, action, or public space would not be possible in the first place. From the foregoing, we see that Arendt describes the work of *homo faber* and action separately, but actually they are intertwined.

She even mentions the importance of these human activities for each other in a passage herself as: “Without being talked about by men and without housing them, the world would not be a human artifice

but a heap of unrelated things to which each isolated individual was at liberty to add one more object; without the human artifice to house them, human affairs would be as floating, as futile and vain, as the wanderings of nomad tribes (Arendt 1958 p. 204).” Without the humans to inhabit or be spoken about by humans, world is not a world and without the human artifice, humans are not citizens, not plural since they would not have a place in common to relate them. This passage and the significance of it will become clear in the next section of the thesis that will try to unravel Arendt’s table analogy.

Arendt and the Table

Arendt argues that living together in the world means that there is a world of things between men who have the world in common. So, the world, with its materiality, like a table, or a building, is the space that relates us to each other. The significance of this analogy becomes apparent when “... a number of people gathered around a table might suddenly, through some magic trick, see the table vanish from their midst, so that two persons sitting opposite each other were no longer separated but also would be entirely unrelated to each other by anything tangible (Arendt 1958 p. 53).” If there is nothing tangible between separate human beings, which is not changing, the relations that we set to each other to make action possible would vanish, there would be no relation; therefore, no action. I find this analogy highly interesting to understand why and how materiality is so important for action to take place. If we look at “the table”, the material artificial square, rectangular or round shaped thing, we see that the thing assigns certain roles to each individual who sit around it.

The content of action and speech is directed toward the person who sits across one around the table, but the table mediates the way in which you present yourself, do your deeds and say your words. The worldly things like the table or a chair or a mug can influence or even determine the content of the action and speech because it relates human beings to one another. Though Arendt here tries to emphasize the agent-revealing capacity of action, she also, maybe unintentionally, is pointing out to the fact that content of action can also be determined by the material things. However, in Arendt’s

understanding of politics, this aspect of action is not the main concern, it is the second aspect of action. The other aspect of action Arendt is mainly concerned with is speech and action that goes directly between men. It is the words or the deeds only, without relating back to anything tangible. This type of action was defined before in the section of public realm of the thesis, relies on remembrance and storytelling. The process of acting and speaking does not produce tangible, durable things like the work of *homo faber* does, but it produces stories, rising from the public space itself. It may seem that Arendt oversees the significance and mediating role of materiality, she does not, but she did not elaborate on it. She was more concerned with emphasizing the importance of human plurality as an anti-thesis to totalitarianism.

Evaluation and Conclusion

The relation between politics (or action) and man-made objects is stronger than Arendt portrays in her whole work. It is technology, like the telescope, that changed our world-view. Through these technologies we opened up the mysteries of nature and the unknown. The technologies she presents and even argues for, mediated and transformed the way in which we perceive reality and the world. Arendt perceives the role of technologies in the sense of the telescope-alienation. According to Arendt, these new technological advancements alienated humans from their immediate surroundings. But apart from this alienating aspect, according to Arendt, technologies or man-made objects constitute the tangible, durable human world. Without a durable human world, there would be no place for humans to speak and act. Like the walls of the Greek Polis, or the table we sit around, we need this materiality to provide at least a demarcation between the private and public realms of the world. It is the public space, the polis itself, that is the place that gathers humans, relates them around a common cause, separates them, and gives them their own place with their unique identities in this common place.

Arendt, with her example of the table or the Greek polis, points out to the role and importance of materiality but then she does not

elaborate on it. There has to be a wall, around the Greek polis, to make a difference, to allow men to gather in a specific place for the performances of their deeds and speaking of their words. So, the walls of the Greek polis *does* something: it separates the public from the private. Likewise, it is the table that relates people who sit around it: they put something on the table metaphorically, a discussion topic that brings them together around that table, and because they are seated in different seats, as different individuals, the table also separates them. So the table also *does* something: it gathers people around it, it relates them and separates them.

To conclude, materiality and technologies play a significant role in Hannah Arendt's concept of politics. The interdependence of action and work stems from the fact that, without the work of the *homo faber* that creates the world, action is not possible. Action presupposes a public realm to take place. There has to be a physical demarcation in the world that signifies that a place is a public space. That is why without the "walls of the Greek polis", a space cannot be a public space. However, a space does not become a public space because it has walls, it becomes a public space when it gathers people, relates and separates them, like Arendt explains with her table analogy. It would be fair then to argue that, according to Arendt, things *do* things. The wall around the Greek polis separates it from the private space; the table relates and separates people who gather around it. Arendt perceives human plurality to be the precondition of politics.

I, therefore, argue that Arendt's theory of politics needs to recognize that *materiality* is also the *precondition of politics*. Apparently, she did not elaborate on this matter herself but it is important for further research on Arendt to understand that Arendt's political action is dependent on and always takes shape through materiality.

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