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Hannah Arendt and the Human Condition

Ian St. John

Stjohn_i@habsboys.org.uk

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Abstract

Usually considered Hannah Arendt's most sustained exercise in social philosophy, *The Human Condition* endeavours to distinguish between the different forms of human engagement with the world considered as forms of action, as opposed to thought. Arendt identifies three forms of such action: Labour, which is effort devoted to sustaining life itself; Work, which is human effort directed towards realising the production of durable use-objects; and Action, which is the initiation of new ventures with other people. Of these, the latter two are essential conditions for living a distinctly *human* life. Work makes the world of durable things which form the stable framework for our lives (houses, furniture, tools etc.). But it is Action that brings into being the web of human relationships, articulated through language, which Arendt considers the reality of the human world. What makes humans unique is their capacity to commence new initiatives, and in so doing they reveal who they are to each other – which means to bring into existence a truly human world. Given the importance of Action in making possible a genuinely human experience, it is a matter of concern for Arendt that in the modern world the scope for free social action is being circumscribed by the subordination of individuals to the demands of the social system of mass production, leading to ever-greater conformity of behaviour and the replacement of open politics with governmental administration. In conclusion we argue that, while Arendt is correct to see modernity as contracting the scope for individual initiative, she is overly pessimistic regarding the extinguishing of Action because she exaggerates the connection between social Action and the practise of politics. People Act in multiple places, not just in the public forum.

In *The Human Condition*, published in 1958 and her most sustained piece of social philosophy, Hannah Arendt, a German philosopher who had fled from Nazism to the United States in 1941, posed the question: **what does it mean to be a human being in the world?** There are, she says, two ways of engaging with the world:

1. To contemplate it.
2. To actively engage with it - the Active Life or *Vita Activa*.

Arendt's focus, in *The Human Condition*, is upon the latter – the *Vita Activa*. Not unexpectedly, philosophers and theologians have, she contends, given much more attention to the contemplative life, the life of thought, so in this work Arendt sees herself as correcting this imbalance. What is more, the basic forms of human action are not only central to the life-experience of all humans, but they in turn create the conditions within which life is lived, shaping thereby our character and our thoughts.

My contention is simply that the enormous weight of contemplation in the traditional hierarchy has blurred the distinctions and articulations within the *vita activa* itself ... and my use of the term *vita activa* presupposes that the concern underlying all activities is not the same as and is neither superior nor inferior to the central concern of the *vita contemplativa*.¹

To this end, Arendt does three things in her book:

1. She describes 'phenomenologically' the basic modes of human action.
2. She traces the evolution through history of these forms of action within society.
3. She seeks to make sense of our current world of action.

In short, her intention is to 'think what we are doing.'²

The Types of Human Action

1. Labour

Arendt defines Labour as *biologically necessary effort to perpetuate the human species*. It is the recurring, repetitive, effort that humans expend to maintain their life on earth – every day we cook, clean, wash, get food, sleep, care for children. We also are born, have sex, and die. As humans we do these things over and over again just as animals do. We are slaves to biological necessity. Historically this Labour has taken place chiefly in the home. It is futile – having done it once we

¹ H. Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Second Edition, 1998), p. 17.

² *Ibid.*, p. 5.

must repeat it over and over. Being a product of what Marx calls our species-essence, Labour is not a distinctively *human* activity.

2. Work

Work or fabrication as a form of action involves formulating a purpose and then realising it through appropriate activity – usually to produce a durable object. Work, unlike Labour, is a distinctively human activity and produces an ‘unnatural’ world of things:

- i. It entails freely positing an end. Work is not necessary and instinctive as Labour basically is.
- ii. Work involves forming a plan and working consciously to realise it.
- iii. It produces a world of **durable things – the man-made world we inhabit**: the world of tables, chairs, pots, pans, houses, roads, books etc. Man is, to use Franklin’s definition, a tool-making animal, and his Work builds a world – yielding *worldliness*, ‘a home for mortal men, whose stability will endure and outlast the ever-changing movement of their lives and actions ...’¹ This world of things is the condition for a distinctively human existence:

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 they were not conditioned by human existence.²

- iv. Work, in contrast to Labour, has a beginning and an end. A person decides, for example, to make an axe to chop down trees. They make the axe and then use it to clear a wood. Rather than making axe after axe, they use the axe they have made multiple times – it becomes a durable element in the furniture of their lives.

To have a definite beginning and a definite, predictable end is the mark of fabrication, which through this characteristic alone distinguishes itself from all other human activities. Labour, caught in the cyclical movement of the body’s life process, has neither a beginning nor an end.³

Through Work, man makes a human world – he uses and transforms nature to produce the durable world of things we inhabit. Tools ease the work of the labourer and provide a house in which they can live and things to use. The world made by Work is stable and durable. In her concept of

¹ *Ibid.*, p. 173.

² *Ibid.*, p. 9.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 144.

worldliness as a system of man-made use-objects, Arendt exhibits the influence of her former teacher Martin Heidegger, who characterised the situation of humans as one of 'worldishness', where 'Da Sein' occupies a world of useful things that are 'ready-to-hand' – as exemplified by his well-known reference to the workman and his hammer.¹

3. Action

By Action, Arendt means *freely initiated actions that people take in conjunction with other people where the outcome is unpredictable.*² Action has the following characteristics:

- i. **Action initiates.** It begins things that did not exist before and reflects the human condition of *natality*: 'its impulse springs from the beginning which came into the world when we were born and to which we respond by beginning something new on our own initiative.'³
- ii. **Action is free.** It is something humans choose to do. It is not necessary, like planting crops or eating food, and it does not follow a single pre-determined plan, as does Work.
- iii. **Action is social.** It takes place between people (rather than between people and things) in the public realm and occurs in the context of what Arendt calls human **plurality** – the fact that, while humans are all *similar*, they are *not the same*. A life that is lived in private, without communication, is, she writes, 'literally dead to the world; it has ceased to be a human life because it is no longer lived among men.'⁴ To live, each of us must enter the 'web of relationships and ... enacted stories' that constitute the intangible world of distinctively human affairs.⁵
- iv. **Actions are unique.** Because all humans are different, and because they interact in ways that have never existed before or will exist again, what is initiated is unique. No debate or war or football game or literary festival will ever be the same as another.
- v. **Action involves Speech.** In action a unique person takes an initiative, and in speech they reveal and disclose that act to others. Without speech there is no action: speech converts a mechanical deed into a human action: when we act we say 'I am doing this for this reason.'

¹ C.f. S. Benhabib, *The Reluctant Modernism of Hannah Arendt* (1996), p. 108. Arendt had been a student of Heidegger's at Marburg in the 1920s and had an affair with the philosopher.

² C.f. H. Arendt, 'Concern with Politics in Recent European Thought', in *Essays in Understanding 1930-1954* (1994), p. 429.

³ Arendt, *Human Condition*, p. 177.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 176.

⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 182-84.

- vi. **Action Discloses Human Reality.** By our actions and speech we reveal *who* as opposed to *what* we are in terms of our ‘qualities, gifts, talents, and shortcomings’ – both as individuals and as humans in general.¹ The public realm expresses the diversity of views of the similar but unique people who occupy it, and as such it discloses the **reality** of the human world. It is, remarks Margaret Canovan, ‘only in the public realm that reality discloses itself’ – an idea with affinities to Heidegger’s notion that it is the role of man to disclose the nature of Being.² ‘Arendt’s distinctive adaption of [Heidegger’s] position lies in her claim that the space in which reality appears is the public and political space which plural human beings can form among themselves ...’³ The ontological assumption underlying this contention, observes Benhabib, is that ‘For humans, being and appearance are one; there is no human essence hidden behind or beyond the appearances. Human life is life that unfolds within the human world of appearances.’⁴
- vii. **Action is unpredictable and has no end.** When we initiate an action with others we don’t know how the event will transpire; and then, once the action is initiated, others will respond with new actions; and so the initial action will trigger a series of actions that cannot be known in advance and have no clear end point, just as there is no one author of events.

The reason why we are never able to foretell with certainty the outcome and end of any action is simply that action has no end. The process of a single deed can quite literally endure throughout time until mankind itself has come to an end.⁵

The outcomes of an Action can only be known after the unpredictable chain of effects has been disclosed. As such, the consequences of an Act are best judged after the actors themselves are dead. One recalls the remark attributed to the Chinese Communist Zhou Enlai who, when asked what was the significance of the French Revolution, is said to have replied: ‘It is too early to say.’⁶ Actors can never properly understand the effects of their actions – only the historian can do this. ‘Although we are all actors,’ comments Benhabib, ‘none of us is the author or producer of

¹ *Ibid.*, p. 179.

² M. Canovan, *Hannah Arendt: A Reinterpretation of Her Political Thought* (1992), p. 111.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 112. Arendt’s idea that reality is revealed in the public sphere represents a radical departure from Heidegger, who saw the public world of *Das Man* as compromised by inauthenticity, idle-talk, and fallenness.

⁴ Benhabib, *The Reluctant Modernism of Hannah Arendt*, p. 110.

⁵ Arendt, *Human Condition*, p. 233.

⁶ It is now said that Enlai was referring, not to the French Revolution of 1789, but to the French student protests of 1968; but Arendt would have thoroughly endorsed the earlier interpretation of his remark.

his or her own life story.’¹ It is not the actor but the story-teller who makes the narrative.

What makes Action so problematic is its Unpredictable and Irreversible nature. We cannot know *what* will be the product of our actions. For example, you encourage a student to join the army. This might lead to glory or a successful career, or it could lead to death or disgrace. One cannot know and yet once the action is initiated it cannot be reversed. *To limit the unpredictability and irreversibility of Action humans have, says Arendt, evolved two mechanisms to limit its effects:*

1. **Forgiveness.** People are not held permanently responsible for their Actions since they are not, in fact, responsible for the consequences of them. While we do punish people for Actions that lead to bad outcomes, we also forgive, for we know that what actually occurs as a result of an Action cannot be truly known by the actor. ‘The discoverer of the role of forgiveness in the realm of human affairs’, says Arendt, ‘was Jesus of Nazareth.’² ‘Forgive them for they know not what they do’, Jesus is said to have exclaimed upon the cross, and this, says Arendt, is true of all Action.³ ‘If ye forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you.’ By contrast, the Old Testament vengeance of ‘an eye for an eye’ perpetuates and reinforces the effects of an Action. Where vengeance sets up a predictable closed pattern of cause and effect, forgiveness is unpredictable – it is itself a free act.⁴
2. **Promises.** People try to reduce the indeterminacy of the future by making promises and contracts. Promises are an attempt to secure an island of certainty amidst the unpredictability of life. On W date X pledges to Y to do Z. By promising to act together over time, social groups gain a great addition of power to realise ends.

The sovereignty of a body of people bound and kept together, not by an identical will which somehow magically inspires them all, but by an agreed purpose for which alone the promises are valid and binding, shows itself quite clearly in its unquestioned superiority over those who are completely free, unbound by any promises and unkept by any purpose. This superiority derives from the capacity to dispose of the future as though it were the present, that is, the enormous and miraculous enlargement of the very dimension in which power can be effective.⁵

¹ Behabib, *The Reluctant Modernism of Hannah Arendt*, p. 113.

² Arendt, *Human Condition*, p. 238.

³ H. Arendt, ‘What Remains? The Language Remains: A Conversation with Gunter Gaus’, *Essays in Understanding*, p. 23.

⁴ Arendt, *Human Condition*, pp. 239-41.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 245.

Historical Evolution of Action

For the greater part of human history Labour was the dominant form of human action. The pressing necessity of keeping alive and reproducing the species was the preoccupation of most people most of the time. Given the recurring necessity to Labour to maintain life, human civilisation was only possible with some form of slavery, whereby Labour was made the compulsory duty of the masses while an elite concerned itself with other forms of activity, notably the Action of politics. *It is vital to understand the fundamental significance Arendt ascribes to the role of political action in the experience of what it means to be a fully realised human being. A political realm arises whenever people gather together to share words and deeds, and this political realm is, in Arendt's view, reality.* For humans the 'world' is 'the space in which things become public ...'¹ It is the space shared with other people, where they appear before others, are seen and recognized, where they speak and act with each other in a common world, and in this way become truly human. This world-disclosing function of politics was, she believes, the great discovery of the Greeks.

The root of the ancient estimation of politics is the conviction that man *qua* man, each individual in his unique distinctness, appears and confirms himself in speech and action, and that these activities, despite their material futility, possess an enduring quality of their own because they create their own remembrance. The public realm, the space within the world which men need in order to appear at all, is therefore more specifically 'the work of man' than is the work of his hands or the labor of his body.²

Indeed, the Greek city state or polis was, for Arendt, paradigmatic of what it means to live a life of Action, whereby leisured male citizens left the Labour of the household to women and slaves in order to enter the public space of the forum where they spoke freely to their peers and initiated unpredictable Actions. The Greeks rigidly separated the public and private realms and saw the political realm as defined by freedom and the domestic realm as defined by necessity. Whereas the family was characterised by hierarchy, law, and duty, the political realm was one where all were equal and free. Hence Aristotle defined man as a *political* animal – not a labouring or tool-making animal. For the Greeks, entering the public sphere involved stepping out of a realm defined by the necessary maintenance of life. To do so required courage and might involve banishment or death and only a minority have ever enjoyed this privilege: the slave, labourer, job holder and businessman do not live in this public political space. The great merit of the forum is that it multiplied the chances for each man to show himself in words and deeds and thus acquire fame. And indeed, since in life most actions are forgotten and thus futile, the polis was also intended to remember great words and deeds and stop them becoming futile.

¹ Arendt, 'What Remains?', p. 20.

² Arendt, *Human Condition*, pp. 207-08.

By contrast, the defining feature of the modern age was the rise of Work to become the dominant form of human action. Where repetitive Labour once occupied the mass of mankind, over time more and more human energy was devoted to the making of durable goods which in turn assisted Labour, raising productivity and allowing still more people to be free from the toil of Labour and so able them to engage in Work or Action. As a result, humans increasingly inhabited a *man-made* as opposed to a natural world and it seemed that man was set to be above all *homo faber* – a tool making animal, not a political one. Yet this was not to be. *For in the eighteenth century the ascendancy of Work ended, being replaced by Labour as the dominant mode of human activity.* According to Arendt, the reason for this unexpected reversal was the growth of the *social division of Labour* and its concomitant, the Industrial Revolution. The social division of labour, under which each person fulfils some part in an overall system of social production, meant that Labour was taken out of the home and made into a collective endeavour to which all contributed. Due to this division of labour each person is no longer a worker in the sense that they do not posit an end and formulate a plan for its realisation. Instead, they become a small part in an eternally recurring process of production. They do not make any one determinate thing, but rather contribute a small and essentially meaningless component to the production of an endless stream of things. The result is what Arendt calls a ‘job-holder’ society.

The Industrial Revolution has replaced all workmanship with labour, and the result has been that the things of the modern world have become labour products whose natural fate is to be consumed, instead of work products which are there to be used.¹

The implications of a mass labour society are twofold:

1. **Where there is a complex integrated social division of labour each person must conform to social expectation and predictably fulfil their narrowly prescribed role.** Instead of the free action of politics there is administration and bureaucracy. With the greater predictability of human action there comes the rise of social sciences based on behavioural assumptions: people are assumed to be the same and act with statistical predictability. Economics is the defining social science of the modern age, with its postulate of rational maximising behaviour, and society regarded like one vast household, with revenues, budgets, rules, duties and collective outcomes. One reflection of this has been the attempt to *plan* future social outcomes – as in the socialist planned economies or the cost-benefit analysis of infrastructure projects. Social targets are set and plans are drawn up for their realisation. The assumption is that the future is predictable and closed and can be fabricated like an object, in contrast to the unpredictably open future initiated by Action.
2. **With mass production comes mass consumption.** With goods emerging in an endless torrent, so must they be consumed endlessly also.

¹ *Ibid.*, p. 124.

Where Work issued in durable things for use, things which made a stable world for people to inhabit, mass Labour produces a stream of things destined to be consumed just once and discarded – this very act of consumption providing the condition for further production. Where durability was once prized in things, it is now a liability, since ‘under modern conditions, not destruction but conservation spells ruin because the very durability of conserved objects is the greatest impediment to the turnover process ...’¹ In this way, also, Labour is again enthroned as the dominant activity – the continual repetitive of making and consuming and making simply to sustain the life, with the result that humans, paradoxically, find themselves again slaves to the natural necessity of the life process as such.

With the rise of conformist mass-labour society, Work and Action have been displaced from economic and political life into the world of **science**. The crucial turning point here was the contribution of Galileo. Galileo made, though Work, a telescope (1609), and then used this telescope to transform man’s understanding of the natural world. He also pioneered the modern experimental method: instead of seeking to understand the world by passively observing it, modern science constructs an experiment that intervenes in nature and changes it to test a hypothesis. The ‘test of a theory became a “practical” one – whether or not it will work.’² In the new science, thinking becomes the handmaiden of doing. Truth and knowledge ‘could only be won by “action” and not by contemplation. It was an instrument, the telescope, a work of man’s hands, which finally forced nature ... to yield its secrets ... Nothing indeed could be less trustworthy for acquiring knowledge and approaching truth than passive observation or mere contemplation. In order to be certain one had to *make* sure, and in order to know one had to do.’³ Thus, modern science is the abode of Work (such as building the Hadron Collider at Geneva), and of Action, since such scientific interventions in the world have unpredictable outcomes, as we find if we alter the structure of DNA or initiate a nuclear reaction.

The Human Condition Now: Action in the Modern Age

In terms of the Active Life, Arendt’s reflections upon the Human Condition suggest the following characteristics:

1. Contemplative thinking is downplayed and devalued. Thinking is deployed in the service of doing, while ‘contemplation itself became altogether meaningless.’⁴

¹ *Ibid.*, p. 253.

² *Ibid.*, p. 278.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 290.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 292.

2. The prevalence of a mass labouring society. Labour moves out from the home and takes over society. Individuals leave home each day to fulfil allotted tasks in order to perpetuate a system the point of which is merely to sustain life on a bigger and bigger scale. Life is process driven – there is no end or object beyond sustaining the system.
3. Individual action is predictable and regular. With people conforming to expected forms of behaviour it becomes possible to model their actions through the behavioural social sciences.
4. Politics as Action in the forum is replaced by government as administration.
5. A widespread belief that it is possible to plan the future of society. Future events are assumed to be predictable and tending towards manageable ends. Fascist and Socialist planning, the European Union, and targeting future climate states are all examples of this tendency. Arendt considers this assumption flawed: any attempt to apply process/making thinking to human affairs fails since predictable products do not emerge from human Action. Action always produces unique events, which in turn trigger further events, and the unexpected therefore always happens.
6. Action and Work are now most exemplified in the world of science, where these methods have unleashed a vast increase in scientific capability with unpredictable outcomes – climate change, genetic engineering, Artificial Intelligence.

What are the ultimate consequences of this mass labour society? Arendt's prognosis is pessimistic.

Socialized mankind is that state of society where only one interest rules, and the subject of this interest is either classes or man-kind, but neither man nor men. The point is that now even the last trace of action in what men were doing, the motive implied in self-interest, disappeared. What was left was a "natural force," the force of the life process itself to which all men and all human activities were equally submitted and whose only aim, if it had an aim at all, was survival of the animal species man. None of the higher capacities of man was any longer necessary to connect individual life with the life of the species; individual life became part of the life process, and to labour, to assure the continuity of one's own life and the life of his family, was all that was needed ... If we compare the modern world with that of the past, the loss of human experience involved in this development is extraordinarily striking. It is not only and not even primarily contemplation which has become an entirely meaningless experience. Thought itself, when it became "reckoning with consequences", became a function of the brain, with the result that electronic instruments are bound to fulfil these functions much better than we ever could. Action was soon and still is almost exclusively understood in terms of making and fabricating, only that making, because of its worldliness and inherent indifference to life, was now regarded as but another form of laboring, a more complicated but not more mysterious function of the life process ... The last stage of the laboring society, the society of jobholders, demands of its members a sheer automatic functioning, as though individual life had actually been submerged in the over-all life process of the species and the only active decision still required of

the individual were to let go, so to speak, to abandon his individuality, the still individually sensed pain and trouble of living, and acquiesce in a dazed, “tranquilized”, functional type of behavior. It is quite conceivable that the modern age – which began with such an unprecedented and promising outbursts of human activity – may end in the deadliest, most sterile passivity history has ever known.¹

The basic condition of modern man is **Alienation**. Humans are alienated from:

- **Nature.** First Cartesian doubt caused man to question the validity of his perceptions of the world. Appearance and Reality parted company. Second, modern science describes a world that has no connection to lived reality – it deals with mathematics, sub-atomic particles, space-time and so on, concepts which have no direct relationship to reality.
- **The Human World.** Reduced to fulfilling minor tasks in servicing a system with no clear or distinct outcome, locked into a rigorous natural necessity, producing goods which are disposable and not durable, and where property has gone from being a fixed part of the earth to being liquid mobile impersonal money, humans cannot find a meaningful stable home within the human world.

The chief loss here, for Arendt, is the experience of human reality. Recall that, for Arendt, the reality of the human world is disclosed through the exchange of plural views among people in a public space. In the public world we are exposed to the multiple standpoints of plural men and reveal to others who we are as unique people. As a result of the conformism of the social system of production, and the replacement of public politics by governmental administration, there is a loss of exposure to this mansidedness, and this is equivalent to a loss of reality.²

Without a space of appearance and without trusting in action and speech as a mode of being together, neither the reality of one’s self, of one’s own identity, nor the reality of the surrounding world can be established beyond doubt.³

Critical Reflections

First, Arendt attaches great importance to participation in the public realm as a sphere of truly Human and revelatory Action. Yet in *The Human Condition* the requirements she sets for what it means to participate in the public realm are very stringent and few people in history can ever be said to have occupied it. Thus, she writes that although all men are capable of ‘deed and word’, most people do not inhabit a ‘space of appearance’ in which they can manifest this capacity and as such are ‘deprived of reality.’ This includes slaves, labourers, craftsmen, businessmen and jobholders.⁴

¹ *Ibid.*, p. 322.

² Canovan, *Hannah Arendt*, p. 113.

³ Arendt, *Human Condition*, p. 208.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 199.

Only those who act on the public stage – warrior-leaders, politicians, those involved in protest movements and revolutions – can fully realise their identity as individuals. But is this plausible? What, after all, are these publicly-acting individuals actually doing? In the sphere of the public political forum – which is the sphere of Action Arendt most identifies – they are using language to persuade and win approval and recognition. They are using, in other words, language to manipulate and shape the opinions of others; they will be evoking ideal futures that, by the very nature of Action, cannot be predictably realised and which they cannot control; they will often be promoting unrest or disturbance and triggering actions that can lead to war, death, and mayhem. The actions of, say, Lenin in 1917 led to the enforced inaction through death of thousands and the conformist enslavement of millions who had no possibility of accessing any kind of public space for decades to come. And can we truly say that politicians peculiarly disclose themselves to others? Does an orator or political activist or electoral candidate, with their ubiquitous resort to cliché and party slogans or even straight lies, really reveal more of themselves than an artist like Rembrandt or Van Gogh, or an author or poet? And even within the political realm of Action, few who participate are ever remembered; few become immortal through remembrance of great deeds – like a Churchill, Washington, Lenin, or Hitler. And maybe, given how damaging the actions of the ‘immortals’ often are, that is just as well.

Second, Arendt’s distinction between Labour and Work is not convincing. Given the importance of distinguishing between these two modes of action, Arendt’s procedure for doing so is rather inadequate – as exemplified by the fact that Work, which seems at one point destined to displace Labour as the dominant form of human action, is then said to transform itself into Labour during the Industrial Revolution, with the consequence that humankind is dominated by Labour both in primitive and modern epochs despite the intervening centuries when Work was in the ascendant, and despite the fact that Labour in the modern age bears very little similarity to Arendt’s initial definition of what Labour is. The essential issue here is: what is Arendt seeking to distinguish between? Critics often refer to her as providing a phenomenological account of types of human action. Yet this doesn’t correspond with her actual distinction between Labour and Work which is based, not on the type of activity undertaken or the experience of it, but on the *type of thing made*: Labour is effort that is biologically necessary for the survival of the species and is common to man and animals, while Work is effort directed to durable products which constitute the man-made world that we inhabit and which separates us from nature. In itself, this tells us little about the *experience* of Labour compared to Work: quarrying rocks to make a building is Work, yet it is at least as onerous and repetitive as tilling the soil for crops – which is Labour. Arendt acknowledges this with her complementary yet distinct definition: Labour is unthinking action where the person fulfils a role that is necessary and given, whereas Work involves positing an end and bringing it about through planning and skill. In this case it is no longer the biologically necessary aspect that is

crucial, but the degree of scope for the autonomous exercise of creativity and reason. This latter definition is more fruitful, though it then means that while some Work in the sense of making durable goods is experienced as Labour, some Labour can be considered Work – say a mother choosing to vary ingredients in her cooking to make her food especially appealing, or a farmer combining different seeds to make a more productive crop.

As these examples suggest, all types of action involve combinations of stereotyped effort (Labour) and creative autonomy (Work), and it is a matter, then, of determining in which ratio they are present. But if this is true of Labour and Work, it is equally true of Action. Again, Arendt tends to draw sharp lines that cannot be found in reality. So, for example, in ancient Greece, Labour was done in the home and Action occurred in the public forum. Yet there is Labour and Work to be done in the public sphere too – listening to debates, planning a speech, reading documents, sitting on committees: all these are part of political Action, but also involve Work or Labour. More importantly, there is Action, too, in the spheres of Labour and Work. Action, for Arendt, means initiating events with other people where the outcome cannot be reliably predicted. Well, is this not true, say, of a meeting among people to form a company? Those present must act collectively; they must discuss what to do and how to do it; they must use skills of persuasion and rhetoric; they do not know in advance how the business will unfold – how competitors will react, whether banks will lend them the money, whether technical problems can be resolved. Most strikingly, the future consequences of this act cannot be known at all! Not merely as to whether the company will make a profit or loss in, say, ten years, but also as to the effects on society and history of the company and its actions. Could Steve Jobs or Paul Zuckerberg have imagined the impact of the mobile phone or *Facebook* for generations to come? Of course not. Creating a company like *Facebook* is as much an Action as arguing in a public forum to introduce a new tax or build a new civic building or seize some land from a neighbouring state.

This has important implications. Arendt surely cannot hold that, throughout history, very few people have engaged in Action. While few may have engaged in political Action in the forum, many more have been engaged in Action within their communities – often alongside being engaged in Labour and Work. In this sense Arendt has failed to properly diagnose the Human Condition as experienced by actual humans: for most people the human condition involves a shifting pattern of effort between Labour, Work, and Action, and to consign people to one or the other is simply unrealistic. This further means that if, as Arendt implies, a fully human life would involve free public Action, then this ideal can be realised within a society of, say, skilled workers, where people are engaged in rational work to fabricate some end (Work) whilst also acting publicly alongside their peers to initiate change with unpredictable outcomes. Arendt, herself, was later to acknowledge this, remarking in 1964 that the

‘world’ was ‘the space in which things become public’, adding that ‘Wherever men come together, in whatever numbers, public interests come into play.’

And the public realm is formed. In America where there are still spontaneous associations, which then disband again ... you can see this very clearly. Some public interest concerns a specific group of people, those in a neighbourhood or even in just one house or in a city or in some other sort of group. Then these people will convene, and they are very capable of acting publicly in these matters – for they have an overview of them ... And, believe me, the difference between the statesman and the man in the street is in principle not very great.¹

If so, the condition of modern humans is not quite so bleak as Arendt suggests in *The Human Condition*: even when reduced to a cog in a system, many people also take initiatives that are free and unpredictable, perhaps through founding a business or creating a charity or taking up a sport. This is important: Arendt’s model of free political action is one which, outside of Greek city states and moments of revolutionary turmoil, has been little seen, and it seems unlikely that political debate in the forum can ever be a meaningful option for the mass of humanity even if (as is doubtful) it is a mode of action uniquely revealing of what it means to be a human being. Nevertheless, there are opportunities for all of us to be human and to reveal who we are in our daily lives in and out of our occupations, and thus possibilities open to all of us to at least resist or escape from the tendency to mass conformist system-based Labour that Arendt correctly sees as a the dominant tendency of modernity.

¹ Arendt, ‘What Remains?’, p. 22.