
An Appraisal of Labour, Work and Action in Hannah Arendt's Political Philosophy

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Abstract

A critical look into the condition of man in the contemporary time reveals apparent aberration. Hannah Arendt describes this situation as “active participation of man in his society”. In The Human Condition, Arendt explores this very idea of the vita activa or the active life. For her, the vita activa means human life insofar as it is actively engaged in doing something. That “activity” is one of the fundamental aspects of the human condition. Thus, Arendt identifies three broad categories of activity, namely: labour, work; and action. This paper examined the concepts of labour, work and action in Hannah Arendt's philosophy. The work employed the qualitative research design where data were sourced from books, journals, periodicals and the internet, to philosophically examine Hannah Arendt's idea of labour, work and action. In line with the above, the historical method was also adopted to situate Arendt's ideas within philosophic history; the expository method employed was to establish Arendt's thought on labour and action, while the e-valuative method was adopted to ascertain the strengths and weaknesses of Arendt's position. The researchers observed that the myriad of challenges bedevilling man, insecurity, political, social, economic and religious upheavals etc. clearly portray that the crave for biological and economic survival by humans has taken over true

political thinking and acting. The work, therefore, concluded that, there is need for social political and moral re-engineering of the human community. This is the only way the common man would be liberated from the shackles of alienation, and deploys his labour, work and action for flourishing.

Introduction

Down through the ages, man's existence has always been characterized by series of struggles. First, for his survival; and subsequently against the socio-political ills he finds in his society - injustice, violation of human rights, subjugation; and alienation. For Hannah Arendt, this struggle for a decent existence is otherwise known as 'active participation' of man in his society. She claims further that this 'active political engagement' between man; his fellows as well as with his environment is the highest goal of human life. In this regard, this paper examines the idea of labour, work and action as enshrined in Hannah Arendt's philosophical thought.

In her book: The Human Condition, Arendt explores the idea of *vita activa* or the active life. For her, the *vita activa* means human life insofar as it is actively engaged in doing something. For her, 'activity' is one of the fundamental aspects of the human condition. In order to explicate her idea of 'activity', Arendt identifies three broad categories of activity, namely: labour, work; and action. She distinguished between labour and work by arguing that whereas labour is the ongoing process of sustaining our existence through the meeting of basic needs, work means the production of things that are new within the world. Further still, because labour is unending, it is fundamentally unfree; and since work is not intervention about cyclical business of meeting needs, but about human intention and purposes, it has a greater degree of freedom. Consequently, action, for Arendt, corresponds to political action in the public sphere. To this end, she argues that action is the exercise of freedom.

However, Arendt's association of freedom to work and action has begs the question: to what extent can work and action guarantee freedom in human existential condition? This paper utilizes the qualitative research design whereby data are sourced from books, journals, and periodicals. While it employs the expository method to expose the idea of labour, work; and action in Arendt's thought, the analytical method is used to critique these ideas within the same thought. The work finds that Arendt carefully redefines labour, work; and action each as a different level of active engagement with the world. It argues that like labour, both work and action are unfree in the strictest sense of the word 'freedom'. It concludes that freedom is not possible in man's existential condition.

Definition of Terms

Labour: To Arendt in her book *The Human Condition*, labour is comprised of all the activity that is necessary to maintain life, “its human condition is life itself”.¹ It corresponds to the biological processes, growth and eventual decay; it is perpetual within the cycle of life and death. Labour does not produce anything permanent as its efforts are quickly consumed, thus, it must be constantly performed and renewed. Because labour is a necessity, it lacks freedom. Labour, work and action are the three elements that constitute Hannah Arendt's *vita activa*. Together, and in combination, they represent Arendt's account of what it means to be human.²

Work: The work of our hands, as opposed to the labor of our bodies, creates the world of human artifice we live in. Not consumer goods but use-objects, and their use does not cause them to disappear: “They give the world they stability and solidity without which it could not be relied upon to house the unstable and mortal creature that is man”.³

¹. Arendt, H. *The Human Condition*. (Chicago: Chicago U. P., 1998), 7

². Arendt, H. *Vita activa – oder Vom tätigen Leben*. (Munich and Zurich: Piper, 2002), 67.

³. Ibid. 173

Labour: Labour 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. Its efforts are quickly consumed and must therefore be perpetually renewed so as to sustain life.

Action: Action is a public category and a practice that is experienced through interaction with others. Actions could only be justified by their public recognition; it is meaningful only in the presence of others who will both understand their actions and recognize their uniqueness.

Vita Activa: *vita activa* is the expression of active life. It is an idea that human life, in so far as it is actively engaged in doing something, is always rooted in a world of men and of man-made things which it never leaves or altogether transcends.

Vita Contemplativa: this represents a thoughtful life or an active life of self and deep reflection or contemplation.

Brief Historical Background of Hannah Arendt

Born into a Jewish family in Hannover, Germany on October 14, 1906.⁴ Arendt was among the greatest women political thinkers of the 20th century, yet one strikingly at odds with academic feminism.⁵ In her November 28, 1964 interview with Gunter Gaus at about 2:36, Gaus described Arendt as a political theorist who attempted to analyze politics and society with unclouded eyes, an attempt which is probably best represented in her central work, *The Human Condition*. In the course of her academic pursuit, Arendt came in contact with some personalities of profound intellectual and philosophical seriousness. First, she studied with the famous philosopher Martin Heidegger, then with Heidegger's

⁴ Young-Bruehl. *Hannah Arendt: For Love of the World*. (London: Yale U. P., 1982), 33

⁵ Baehr, P. *The Portable Hannah Arendt*. (USA: Penguin, 2000), vi

former teacher, Edmund Husserl. Subsequently in her academic journey, she found in Karl Jaspers, under whose supervision she wrote her doctoral thesis, human qualities of integrity sadly absent in the author of *Being and Time*. The topic of her doctoral thesis was "The Concept of Love in St. Augustine (1929), a work that brought together personal experience and a university training in Philosophy, Greek, and Theology.⁶

By 1929, Anti-Semitism was on the rise in Germany. After being arrested and briefly imprisoned by the Gestapo in 1933, Arendt left Germany for Paris. When Nazi Germany occupied France, she was detained as an 'enemy alien' but was released after a short while; and made her way to New York, where she lived until her death in 1975.⁷ Although Arendt held several visiting positions at universities both in the US and globally, she resisted the temptation to take on a tenured role in a university preferring the freedom of combining writing, teaching, politics and other work. Her book *The Life of the Mind*, the sequel to which she saw as a part of the same project as *The Human Condition*, is still unfinished.⁸

Precursory thoughts to Arendt's Idea of the *Vita Activa*

The ancient Greek philosophers saw the *vita contemplativa* or the life of contemplation as the ultimate aim of human life. Representing this tradition of thinking is Plato and Aristotle. Arendt once observed that after the shock demise of his teacher, Plato had "... no aim other than to make possible the philosopher's way of life."⁹ Since this way of life was, as Socrates mode of existence had overtly revealed, "the essentially

⁶. Ibid. viii

⁷. Ibid. ix

⁸. Buckingham, W. "The Life of Activity: Work, Labour and Action". *Looking for Wisdom*, 10 May, (2021)PDF

⁹. Arendt, H. *The Human Condition*. (Chicago: Chicago U. P., 1998), 14

speechless state of contemplation”¹⁰ Plato initiated the triumphal march of an inherently unpolitical political tradition throughout Western history: the preaching of the *vita contemplativa*.¹¹

For Aristotle, *theōria* or contemplation was far more important than praxis or practical activity. He claims that doing better is valuable only to the extent that it helps us with thinking better. This thought system continued through the medieval times until the modern age when this idea about the ultimate concern of human life changed from contemplation to action: so that the aim of thinking better is doing better. Commenting on this intellectual shift, Arendt says the reversal of hierarchy between thinking and doing is one of the most important transformations in western thought. She writes: "Perhaps the most momentous of the spiritual consequences of the discoveries of the modern age ... has been the reversal of the hierarchical order between the *vita contemplativa* and the *vita activa*".¹²

This reversed tradition of thinking about the human life is represented by Marx. In his *Theses on Feuerbach*, Marx complains that we are too hung up on contemplation and insufficiently attentive to 'sensuous human activity.'¹³ He challenges us to ask what it would be to think about human life not just as something to theorise about, but instead as something that we can actively shape. As we find in the concluding paragraph of his Theses, Marx claims that: "The philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point is to change it."¹⁴ Thinking differently about the world is all very well. But for Marx, the ultimate justification of

^{10.} Ibid. 302

^{11.} Ibid. 15

^{12.} Ibid. 21

^{13.} Marx, K. *Theses on Feuerbach*. Lough, W. (Trans.). (Moscow: Progress Pub., 1969), 5–6

^{14.} Ibid. 11

philosophy lies in whether it allows us to behave differently, or to act differently.

Whereas Plato and Aristotle claim that there is a hierarchy between thinking and doing, with thinking having the upper hand, Marx turns this hierarchy upside down and says that doing should have the upper hand. For Arendt, however, the problem is the hierarchy itself. Instead of seeing the *vita contemplativa* and the *vita activa* as existing in a hierarchical relationship, she claims that we should instead see them as different aspects of human life (qtd in Buckingham). Put differently, for Arendt, therefore, contemplation is good, in and of itself. But likewise, digging the garden is good (labour). So also, is making a chair out of wood, or baking a cake, or putting on a play (work). Arendt's observation is that there are many different good things. And if you try to gather them together under a single principle, you miss the complexity and the diversity of human life. So, in resisting these hierarchies, Arendt wanted to open the door to seeing human being whole, so that we can start to understand human life in its complexity and its messiness.

Freedom And the *Vita Activain* Arendt's Thought

For Arendt, the active life means "human life insofar as it is actively engaged in doing something."¹⁵ She argues that activity is one of the fundamental aspects of the human condition. To understand this idea of activity, thus, Arendt identifies three broad categories of activity, namely: labour, work; and action. In her *The Human Condition*, she puts it thus: "With the term *vita activa*, we propose to designate three fundamental human activities: labor, work, and action. They are fundamental because each corresponds to one of the basic conditions under which life on earth has been given to man."¹⁶

¹⁵. Buckingham, W. "The Life of Activity: Work, Labour and Action". *Looking for Wisdom*, 10 May, (2021).

¹⁶. Arendt, H. *The Human Condition*. (Chicago: Chicago U. P., 1998), 7

Labour: At the most fundamental level, we need to provide for our bodily, biological needs. We need to feed ourselves. We need fresh water. We need shelter. It is this struggle to meet our biological needs that Arendt calls labour. For her, labour is an ongoing process of sustaining our existence through the meeting of basic needs. It is unending: we need to keep labouring to keep food on the table. Following from this reality, therefore, Arendt claims that at some basic level, humans are unfree. This is because, we are bound to our biological needs, and as these needs will continue as long as we live, so too will the need for labour. In *The Human Condition*, she writes that of the three, the cycle of labour and consumption is "the least worldly... the least durable and at the same time the most natural of all things."¹⁷

According to Arendt, natural phenomena such as water cycle or the carbon cycle illustrate that nature does not "know neither birth nor death",¹⁸ but follows a cyclical process. As she puts it delicately, "... it is only within the human world that nature's cyclical movement manifests itself as growth and decay."¹⁹ Therefore, human needs to address the cyclical condition of life by engaging in a continuous process of labouring and consumption.

Take for example, you are marooned on a desert island. Fortunately, the island has an abundance of good fresh fruit, tasty tubers, and flavor some rodents to feast on. In the centre of the island is a small spring that provides fresh water. You have everything you need. But to sustain your daily life in this little paradise, you have to put in the time. You have to pick those fruits, dig up those tubers, chase down those rodents, and go back and forth to the spring to gather water. Now this process of picking;

^{17.} Ibid. 96

^{18.} Ibid. 96

^{19.} Ibid. 97

digging; chasing; and fetching of water takes place the following day, and so on. This is what the notion of labour is like, as per Arendt.

Work: For Arendt, work means the production of things that are new within the world. It is the reshaping of the world rather than the meeting of basic needs. Examples of work include: architecture, baking, novel writing, the creation of institutions etc. Arendt argues that it is through work that human, as *homo faber*, "conducts himself as lord and master of the whole earth."²⁰ Work is not about the cyclical business of meeting needs, but about human intentions and purposes. It is not just survival in the world, but intervention in the world. Upon this basis, work, for Arendt, has a greater degree of freedom.²¹

By work, Arendt argues, human disrupts the cycle of nature and uses its matter to produce durable and therefore, unnatural but worldly objects.²² Through work, thus, we don't just sustain our survival. Instead, we turn the world into a world that is partly human-made. We create objects and institutions that endure. For example, if on your desert island you decide to build a little hut to live in, then that is work. You spend a few days building, and at the end of it, your world is slightly different from how it was before.

Arendt observes that past thinkers have obscured the distinction between labour and work. That is, they have seen the activity of digging for tubers and the activity of building a hut as the same thing. However, Arendt opines that work is not just about bare survival. It is about bringing something new into being. Once you have reshaped the world through work, you have won for yourself a degree of freedom. You can sit in your

^{20.} Ibid. 139

^{21.} Ibid. 127

^{22.} Ibid. 143

new hut, snug and cosy, and enjoy the benefits of your new shelter, long after the work is done.²³

The work of our hands, as opposed to the labor of our bodies, creates the world of human artifice we live in. Not consumer goods but use-objects, and their use does not cause them to disappear: “They give the world they stability and solidity without which it could not be relied upon to house the unstable and mortal creature that is man”.²⁴

However, their durability is not absolute. We use them up or they decay:

If left to itself or expelled from the human world, the chair will again become wood, and the wood will decay and return to the soil from which the tree sprang before it was cut down to become the material upon which to work and with which to build. However, while usage is bound to use up these objects, this end is not planned before, it was not the goal for which it was made, as the 'destruction' or immediate consumption of the bread is its inherent end; what usage wears out is durability. In other words, destruction, though unavoidable, is incidental to use but inherent in consumption”.²⁵

The things work produces have their own “objective” independence. It is that durability which makes their independence from man, gives them their objectivity, and lets them “stand against” for a time the needs of their living users: “Against the subjectivity of men stands the objectivity of the man-made artifice, not the indifference of nature”.²⁶

²³. Buckingham, W. "The Life of Activity: Work, Labour and Action". *Looking for Wisdom*, 10 May, (2021)

²⁴. Arendt, H. *The Human Condition*. (Chicago: Chicago U. P., 1998), 173

²⁵. Ibid. 173

²⁶. Ibid. 174

Without the artificial environment, we would not see nature as “objective”. Durability, objectivity, and reification are the result of work. It is reification. Solidity comes from matter which is transformed into material:

Material is already a product of human hands that have removed it from its natural location, either killing a life process, as in the case of the tree which provides wood, or interrupting one of nature's slower processes, as in the case of iron, stone, or marble torn out of the womb of the earth. This element of violation and violence is present in all fabrication, and man as the creator of the human artifice has always been a destroyer of nature. The experience of this violence is the most elemental experience of human strength, and by the same token the very opposite of the painful, exhausting effort experienced in sheer labor. . . homo faber becomes lord and master of nature herself insofar as he violates and partly destroys what was given to him.²⁷

Work is determined by means and ends. The object of work is an end product in two senses: the process comes to an end in it, and that the process is only a means to this end. In contrast with labor, where labor and consumptions are two stages of the same process, fabrication and usage are totally different processes. Fabrication ends and is not repeated. The craftsman's repetition comes from the need to earn a living, the element of labor in his work, or the demand for multiplication on the market. The repetition is not tied to the process in itself.

²⁷ Ibid. 174

Work is also reversible. What is made by human hands can be destroyed by them, and no product of work is so vital that we cannot destroy it. In work, we have a form of mastery that is not present in labor (because our bodies depend on it) and in action (because it depends on other people): “Alone with his image of the future product, *homo faber* is free to produce, and again facing the work of his hands, he is free to destroy”.²⁸

Making is determined by means and ends, and this is most obvious in the role which tools and instruments play in it. Man is a tool-maker. Tools are also used in the laboring process, but they are primarily used to lighten the burden; it is an anthropocentric position, and their fitness is dictated by objective aims. They are use-things for laboring, not the result of laboring itself. The main point of work, when done as labor, is not the purposeful effort or the product, but the rhythm of the process it imposes on the laborers:

Labor implements are drawn into this rhythm where body and tool swing in the same repetitive movement—until in the use of machines, which are best suited to the performance of laboring because of their movement, it is no longer the body's movement that determines the movement of the implement, but the machine's movement that enforces the movements of the body, while, in a more advanced state, it replaces it altogether”.²⁹

It is an important point that the question of whether man should adjust to machines or if machines should adjust to man never appeared with respect to labor tools—because tools of workmanship are servants of the hand, while machines make laborers adjust to them. Our most basic

²⁸. Ibid. 175

²⁹. Ibid. 175-176

experience of instrumentality comes from the fabrication process, where it is “true that the end justifies the means; it does more, it produces and organizes them”.³⁰

The end justifies the violence done to nature to get the material, and the end product organizes the work. Everything and everyone is judged in terms of suitability: “the validity of the means-end category is not exhausted with the finished product for which everything and everybody becomes a means”.³¹ While the object is an end for the means, it is not an end in itself, not so long as it is used. It is immediately put into another means-end chain, such as comfortable living, or as an exchange object. Utilitarianism, as the philosopher of the worker, “gets caught in the unending chain of means and ends without ever arriving at some principle which could justify the category, that is utility itself”.³² The usual way out is to make the user, man, the ultimate end. But this Kantian solution is inadequate:

By elevating man, the user into the position of an ultimate end, he degrades even more forcefully all other 'ends' to mere means. If man the user is the highest end, 'the measure of all things,' then not only nature, treated by fabrication as the almost 'worthless material' upon which to work and bestow 'value' (as Locke said), but the 'valuable' things themselves have become mere means, losing thereby their own intrinsic worth. Or to put it another way, the most worldly of all activities loses its original objective meaning, it becomes a means to fulfill subjective ends; in and by itself, it is no longer meaningful, no

^{30.} Ibid. 176

^{31.} Arendt, H. *Responsibility and Judgment*. (New York: Schocken, 2003), 176

^{32.} Arendt, H. *The Human Condition*. (Chicago: Chicago U. P., 1998), 176

matter how useful it may be. . . . From the viewpoint of fabrication the finished product is as much an end in itself, an independent durable entity with an existence of its own, as man is an end in himself in Kant's moral philosophy.³³

The issue is not instrumentality as such, but rather the generalization of the experience of work in which utility is established as the ultimate standard for the world. This is always a temptation. But it can never answer the question, what is the use of use? In the sphere of work, there is only one kind of object to which the unending chain of means and ends does not apply: art, which is the most useless and most durable thing men make. A couch can be a masterpiece to a later generation, put in a museum, and removed from all possible usage. The purpose of art is to attain permanence by transcending utility.

Action: The third kind of activity that Arendt explores is action. Action is profoundly social. For as she once said, "... men, not Man, live on the earth and inhabit the world."³⁴ Following from this line of thought, she explicate her idea of action. For her, therefore, action is what happens when we come together in society with others, each of us with our own uniqueness, our own talents, our own qualities, and our own concerns, and we try to work out how to refashion our shared world.

Therefore, action corresponds to political action in the public sphere. For Arendt, *homo faber* "... is fully capable of having a public realm of his own."³⁵ To this end, Arendt defines action as the exercise of freedom. It is born out of our own identity and individuality. Action sets into motion

³³. Ibid. 177

³⁴. Ibid. 7

³⁵. Ibid. 160

new possibilities and new beginnings in the shared political and social world. It is not just sustaining our existence (labour), or making something within the pre-ordained possibilities of the world (work), rather, it is bringing into being new possibilities. For Arendt, therefore, only action and speech can meet the human condition of plurality through individual distinction, not simply regarding personal abilities to craft certain objects but 'qua men.'³⁶

If the active life was only about labour and work, nothing would ever change. We would have just keep on remaking the world in the same way as it had always been. Work just replicates the same structures again and again. But action is where change starts to happen. Action is about acting in society with others to change the structures of which we are a part. And this process is fundamentally social. There is no action, Arendt argues, in isolation. She writes that action means "... the 'web' of human relationships, with its innumerable, conflicting wills and intentions."³⁷ It is only when we engage in action that we start to reshape, reimagine and reinvent our shared world. Action is when we take to the streets to protest. Or it is when we get together to rethink our shared world, and so on.

Life has a non-biological sense; it manifests in words and deeds. Words and deeds are our entrance into the specifically human world:

Since through birth we entered Being, we share with all other entities the quality of Otherness, an important aspect of plurality that makes [sic] that we can define only by distinction, that we are unable to say what anything is without distinguishing it from something else.³⁸

³⁶ Ibid. 176

³⁷ Ibid. 176

³⁸ Ibid. 178

Only man can express otherness and individuality; we communicate ourselves, not just something, like thirst or hunger. In man, otherness becomes uniqueness. Every human is conditioned by plurality: we live together. Acts and speech are always tied to the fact that we live among equals; they are always somehow tied to the question of “Who are you”. The disclosure of who one is implicit in the fact that speechless action does not exist, or is at least irrelevant; the person who acts is also the one “who identifies himself as the actor and announces what he is doing, what he has done, or what he intends to do” (179).³⁹ The disclosure of who one is hidden from the person themselves; it is really only visible to others. But action without a “who” is meaningless, whereas anonymous art keeps its power. Consider the monuments to unknown soldiers:

The unwillingness to resign oneself to the brutal fact that the agent of the war was actually Nobody inspired the erection of the monuments to the unknown ones—that is to all those whom the war had failed to make known, robbing them thereby, not of their achievement, but of their human dignity.⁴⁰

Men live in a web of relationships, woven by deeds and words, of the living and the dead. Every new act falls into that web and can begin a new process. Because of this already existing web, action almost never succeeds. And because of this unpredictability, action produces stories, intentionally or not, as often as work produces things. The stories appear in documents, poetry, and monuments. The stories are different from their reifications; they tell us about their subjects, their heroes, more than the table talks about the craftsman. While everyone starts their own story, no one is the author of it:

And yet, it is precisely in these stories that the actual

³⁹. Ibid. 179

⁴⁰. Ibid. 179

meaning of a human life finally reveals itself. That every individual life between birth and death can be eventually told as a story with beginning and end is the prepolitical and prehistorical condition of history, the great story without beginning and end.⁴¹

Every life has a story and history is the story of mankind because they are the outcomes of action; we are not made. The absence of a maker is the main reason for the frailty and unreliability of human affairs. Every action sets off a chain reaction of unpredictable processes. That is inescapable; it cannot be avoided by limiting one's actions to limited networks or by calculating outcomes with computers. One deed can be enough to make big changes.

Actions are not only unpredictable, they are irreversible. Actions cannot be destroyed like tables. The irreversibility and unpredictability of action cannot be erased, only tempered. Irreversibility can be tempered by the faculty of forgiving, and unpredictability can be tempered by promises. Forgiving is about the past, and promising is about the future.

Being forgiven releases us from the consequences of past actions; without that, we would always be tied to past deeds and the future would close up. Promises give islands of security in the unpredictable future, without which there would be no continuity or durability. Without being bound to promises, we would never achieve any sort of identity or continuity that a “person” needs in order to have a story told; “each of us would be condemned to wander helplessly and without direction in the darkness of his own lonely heart, caught in its ever changing moods, contradictions, and equivocalities”.⁴²

^{41.} Ibid. 180

^{42.} Ibid. 181

That sort of subjective identity, of binding oneself through promises, is different from the object-related, objective, identity which arises out of work. Without action, without the capacity to start something new and thus articulate the new beginning that comes into the world with the birth of each human being, the life of man, spent between birth and death, would indeed be doomed beyond salvation. The life span itself, running toward death, would inevitably carry everything human to ruin and destruction. Action, with all its uncertainties, is like an ever-present reminder that men, though they must die, are not born in order to die but in order to begin something new.⁴³

Arendt wants to develop a hierarchical model of practical activities, which she divides into three broad categories: labour, work, and action. Though each is inescapable, given our human condition, they contribute unequally to our flourishing. A life of sheer labour would not be a fully human life. A life of work, while more humane, would still be incomplete. Only a life that makes a significant space for what Arendt calls action fully expresses our humanity.

Arendt's Idea of Natality

For Arendt, philosophers are often preoccupied with mortality, by the fact that human beings die. But they pay less attention to the way that human beings give birth to new things and new worlds. Natality is about the ever-present possibility of change. It is about the way we can together give birth to newness in the world. She writes:

Labour and work, as well as action, are also rooted in natality in so far as they have the task to provide and preserve the world for, to foresee and reckon with, the constant influx of newcomers who are born into the world as strangers. However, of the three, action has

⁴³. Ibid. 181

the closest connection with the human condition of natality; the new beginning inherent in birth can make itself felt in the world only because the newcomer possesses the capacity of beginning something anew, that is, of acting. In this sense of initiative, an element of action, and therefore of natality, is inherent in all human activities. Moreover, since action is the political activity par excellence, natality, and not mortality, may be the central category of political, as distinguished from metaphysical, thought.⁴⁴

Critique of Arendt's Thought

For Arendt, 'action' is where we are most free. When we are labouring, we are caught up in necessity. We are subject to our bodily needs and unfree. When we are working, we free ourselves to some extent from these needs by reshaping the world so that we can enjoy a degree of freedom. However, our freedom is still limited. We are still a part of the world that we have inherited, and all of its structures. Again, the boundary between labour and work is blurred. There are ongoing tasks to sustain the products of our work: the roof needs fixing from time to time; and none of the objects that we fabricate is entirely durable. The subtle distinction between labour and work is that, unlike labour, the products of our work are capable of outlasting us. For this reason, work has a social dimension, while labour does not. For example, if you get rescued from that desert island, it won't matter to the next castaway that you have laboured to pick and eat fruit. But the house you have worked on will still be standing, and the new castaway can move in.

Further still, to say labour is devoid of a certain degree of freedom, then associating freedom to work and action is problematic. Like labour,

^{44.} Ibid. 9

work and action does not arise from nowhere. There is always a cause for each activity. Both work and action arise to meet a certain human need.⁴⁵ For example, to build a hut on the desert island suggests human desire to satisfy his need of shelter. However, this shelter may endure, there is something that prompted its creation: the human desire for shelter. Moreover, to associate freedom to work and action on the basis that they endure to the neglect of labour presupposes a bias of thought. Since labour satisfies biological needs, regardless of how this satisfaction is brief, labour deserves an appropriation of a certain degree of freedom too. Even though we must note that mere endurance does not satisfy for the condition of freedom.

According to Benhabib's suggestion, the problematic dimension of Arendt's theory of *Vita Activa* is not because of her conceptual sharp distinction of the three activities, but the problem arises from our confusion regarding the identification of the level on which Arendt is operating on.⁴⁶

Nevertheless, one could criticize Arendt easily by saying that the distinctions simplify the human activity, which might tempt the reader to reduce every particular activity into one single type: labor, work or action. Benhabib points out that this remark has been made as a standard objection by scholars, who claim that “any complex human activity, from factory work, to writing a book, to making a meal, cannot simply be seen as an exemplar of a single action type” (131).⁴⁷

Conclusion

From the foregoing, the *vita activa* means human life as it is actively

⁴⁵. Arendt, H. *Between Past and Future*. (New York: Viking Press, 1968), 79

⁴⁶. Benhabib, Seyla. *The Reluctant Modernism of Hannah Arendt*. (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 1996), 124

⁴⁷. Ibid. 131

engaged in carrying out activities in the society. These activities include: labour, work; and action. Whereas, labour meets the biological needs of human beings, work recreates the natural world into its own image of industrial utility, communication and information super-hi-ways; and action brings into being new possibilities.

This paper examines Hannah Arendt's thought on labour, work and action and postulates that her thought has enormous implications for the contemporary society. One is made to understand that her criticisms of the modern society (modernity is a corruption of political activity) which she expresses pessimism about the demise of the hope of eternity and that of immortality, the future of man is at stake and that involves trying to rescue from oblivion the quest for immortality, attests to the fact that truly, man's condition is appalling and pitiable and needs to be changed so that he will live a happy and joyous life; to live to fulfill and enjoy the essence or purpose of his existence on earth. That is, man hopes to enjoy the fruits of his labour and not to be alienated from, he needs not be provided with only the resources to survive (like animals) but those resources that can utilize to stay alive and perform actions or activities that can leave legacies in this world, and, in that respect, he hopes that his actions speak for him and preserve his good deeds for the common good of all now and for future generations.

For Arendt, work, and action suggests some degree of freedom in human's existential condition because they are not bound by some biological needs. However, to associate freedom to work and action on the basis that they are not bound by biological needs is misleading. Like labour, both work and action do not emanate from nowhere. There is always a cause for which work and action are the effects. To have freedom at all, both work and action must emerge independently of any cause. But this is impossible hence, freedom in human existential

condition is not possible.

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