

Hannah Arendt's Precondition for Atrocity:
A Philosophical Examination of the Final Solution in a Modern World

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ABSTRACT

HANNAH ARENDT'S PRECONDITION FOR ATROCITY: A PHILOSOPHICAL EXAMINATION OF THE HOLOCAUST IN A MODERN WORLD

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This thesis describes Hannah Arendt's endeavor to address how the Holocaust could take place in a modern world. In her book, *The Human Condition*, Arendt describes how the modern break down of the public and private realms, the uniformity of men and lack of plurality have led to a society indulged in consumption. As a result, human beings have failed to display their personal stories to the world around them and have conformed to prevailing singular ideology in sheer 'thoughtlessness.' It is this type of society which has provided the basis for the Holocaust and similar atrocity in contemporary times.

1. INTRODUCTION

With the aim to destroy every Jewish man, woman and child both what was accomplished during the Holocaust and the overwhelming lack of resistance from national and international contexts exposed a darker side of humankind than had ever previously been revealed. Living in a post- Holocaust world we all have the same seemingly unanswerable questions, that is, why was the final solution possible? Moreover, how should this affect our perceptions about atrocity today?

In her work, *The Human Condition*, Hannah Arendt discovers humankind's submersion into a condition that provides the foundation for atrocity. Arendt demonstrates that the Holocaust was not an event strictly limited to Nazi Germans as perpetrators and Jews as victims. *The Human Condition* offers a phenomenological examination of the modern world that has provided the context for a people so adrift from what it means to be human and what it means to live in *the world* that humankind can easily be reduced to a species of laborers. Without a rigid conception of what it means to be human, humankind is losing the attribute that has distinguished it from the rest of animal species.

The purpose of my scholarship is to examine the development of a world that consistently permits atrocity by dehumanization. Thus, I have chosen to focus on the Holocaust because of its fairly modern occurrence in which this dehumanization or "loss

of humanity” has been highly documented. It is Arendt’s thesis that such atrocity is only possible in the modern world. In turn, my work is intended to defend Arendt’s view and demonstrate that we still live in such a world. Nazism may have become defunct but the conditions that permitted its existence- the superfluosity of the persons Arendt discusses- still certainly exist. In the following chapters, each section will provide a comprehensive examination of Arendt’s political thought by focusing on the elements of her philosophy that are central to many of her claims. These central claims, in essence, concern action, plurality, modernity and the role of a political forum for action.

Action is a theme so fundamentally significant for Arendt that I dedicate an entire chapter to it; for Arendt, if the reader can come to understand the role of *action* he/she is already well on his/her way to understanding politics. I will also discuss how modernity makes atrocity possible. In particular, I will address the loss of the public and private realms and the emergence of the social. This also includes the shift from an *action* based world to *work* and eventually *labor*. The chapter *Assault on Plurality* examines the outlook of a world without action in which human beings are reduced to an animal species and where conformity conquers all. It is here that the means to have a Holocaust become evident; it is here that the preconditions for atrocity appear. Finally, *Victims of Worldlessness* offers a critique of the modern world and its “loss of humanity” in general. This chapter addresses how politics has been affected by a labor driven society and how discourse as action offers insight to understanding our modern dilemma.

What I am careful not to address in my research is the history of “Jewishness.” In other words, I willingly concede that Jewish identity is accompanied by a unique history

that certainly played a large role in Jewish persecution. However, the details of this distinct history are not significant here. Additionally, I am not concerned with an empirical examination of Arendt's theses regarding the Holocaust. I am concerned with the problems that make such atrocity possible for the whole of humankind. Again, my research is concerned with the Holocaust in regards to its development and its effects. On the other hand, this goal will be accomplished by spending some time on the Third Reich's conception and structure, the ghettos and the camps, the gas chambers and finally the international response. A thorough study of Arendt can help us all understand the nature of the challenge that lies ahead and the means to devise a remedy that can restore humanity to its dignified state.

2. ACTION

“The miracle that saves the world, the realm of human affairs, from its normal, ‘natural’ ruin is ultimately the fact of natality, in which the faculty of action is ontologically rooted.”¹

The ‘natural’ ruin which Arendt describes above is the unrelenting cycle between birth and death. Human beings are without exception subject to this vicious cycle that is oftentimes filled with the oppressive treatment caused by fellow human beings. The brutalities that accompany war, oppressive governments and harsh living conditions have plagued human beings for centuries. This difficult reality has many times led philosophers to examine the human meaning of life. The answer to this has drawn many to explore the significance of death and draw up philosophies that concern humankind’s ability to immortalize itself and thus transcend death.

Events such as the Holocaust push us even harder to examine what purpose humans serve in life. If humans must live, suffer then die then one might wonder why it is that we live at all. Although both religion and traditional philosophy have often suggested that we focus on death as a means to understand humankind’s purpose, Arendt devises a philosophy that discovers a meaningful life by encountering not death but birth. This *philosophy of natality*, so to speak, derives its meaning from human beings as they

¹ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 247

live. Natality, like birth, is the place of origination, where action begins and action for Arendt rescues the meaningful human life.

For humankind, natality is significant precisely because it interrupts what already is. Alongside the biological aspects humans possess, birth initiates for them the ability to change the world, to *change history* with their ability to act. As such, action permits human beings to escape nature's cyclical pattern of life and death and also adds purpose to the life lived in the interim. From birth, humans can create and leave behind a history which transcends death; a transcendence which, in Arendt's viewpoint, renders death insignificant. Thus, natality offers the grand gift of initiating which direction history will take; it extends action to the world.

“To act, in its most general sense, means to take an initiative, to begin...to set something in motion...”² Therefore, despite the contextual circumstances that may exist in any society at any given time, each life represents the possibility for change. Discourse, alone, has the power to reveal distinct individuals to the world in such a way that the originality of each person offers a challenge to the normalcy of what has already been established. The fact, that each person possesses this power to act denotes that change will remain spontaneous; originality and spontaneity coupled together are adequate to insure that change is constant.

Human beings are naturally endowed with the capability to rescue themselves from idle life. “In acting and speaking, men show who they are, reveal actively their

² Arendt, *The Human Condition* 177

unique personal identities and thus make their appearance in the human world...”³ This ‘revelatory quality’⁴ renders action vital to humankind and thus is a primary theme in Arendtian philosophy. Still, action needs the proper context to be actualized. In our modern world, although still equipped with action, humans are no longer born into a *world* in which they can display themselves. The modern world has instead provided a context in which action has been abandoned in favor of consumption; a place where humans live in isolation. Consequently, Arendt expresses, “[w]hat is at stake is the revelatory character without which action and speech would lose all human relevance.”⁵

Action cannot exist in isolation; humans can only appear and act towards one another. Without a world that relates one human to another action dwindles. Action can work to establish relations only when a *world* exists for human beings to relate to one another in the first place. The modern world, Arendt contends, is not such a place because indulgence in consumption separates humans and abandons the pluralism that binds *a world*. Without action humans lose sight of their own meanings and easily become the prey of ideology and conformity. It is fundamental because it insures a political forum, it demands that humans display themselves to each other and so it tramples conformity and destroys the possibility of modern day atrocity.

³ Ibid. at 179

⁴ Ibid. at 180

⁵ Ibid. at 182

The Archimedean Point

The perplexity inherent in the discovery of the Archimedean point was and still is that the point outside the earth was found by an earth-bound creature, who found that he himself lived not only in a different but in a topsy-turvy world the moment he tried to apply his universal world view to his actual surroundings.⁶

Labor, work and action are the human conditions that Arendt views as a summation of humankind's distinctive existence. *Labor* is the condition that sustains life, *work* permits durability and permanence, *action* permits one to create a history and acts as the agent for distinct individuals to disclose themselves to the rest of the world (a plurality). *World*, for Arendt, represents human beings coexisting in relation to one another. It is Arendt's contention that our modern world has become overly obsessed with first work and then labor so that action has been abandoned. This transformation to our modern world began with what Arendt describes as the discovery that humans could abandon their confinement to earth; earth alienation predicated world alienation. Humankind's obsession with finding a place other than earth mounted with the Copernican revolution. Afterwards, humans began to elevate their own work so that in their eyes it became equivalent to the work of God. Arendt describes the discovery of the telescope as the birth of the modern world.

⁶ Id. at 284

In a modern world men have found a way to act on the earth ...as though we dispose of it from the outside.⁷ “What Galileo did and what nobody had done before was to use the telescope in such a way that secrets of the universe were delivered to human cognition ‘with the certainty of sense perception’; that is, he put within the grasp of an earth-bound creature and its body-bound senses what had seemed forever beyond its reach.”⁸ Humans began to think of themselves as masters of nature with the ability to construct a separate world. They began the expropriation of nature so that an accumulation of wealth could be accomplished. This describes production and consumption, processes accomplished in isolation; accomplished best in world alienation.

Here, reference to the Archimedean point becomes relevant. Arendt cites Franz Kafka “[h]e found the Archimedean point, but he used it against himself; it seems that he was permitted to find it only under this condition.” This discovery was the means to construct a world that freed man from his biological necessities, *labor*. Human beings believed, “...the labor of our body which is necessitated by its needs is slavish.”⁹ As a result humans became consumed with *work*, devising methods in which labor could be completely abandoned. “[I]nstead of observing natural phenomena as they were given to him, he placed nature under the conditions of his mind, that is, under conditions won from a universal, astrophysical viewpoint, a cosmic standpoint outside nature itself.”¹⁰ And so the reversal of positions occupied by action and work was natural in such a

⁷ Id. at 262

⁸ Id. at 260

⁹ Id. at 83

¹⁰ Id. at 265

setting. It was after all the development and glorification of tools, such as the telescope, that predicated the modern era in the first place.

Moreover, scientific progress demanded further scientific development which fueled even more refined tools and instruments. “Processes, therefore, and not ideas, the models and shapes of the things to be, become the guide for the making and fabricating activities of *homo faber* (worker) in the modern age.”¹¹ Thus, *work* causes humans to identify as the *homo faber*, whose primary concern is preserving him/herself beyond death. Nonetheless, indulgence in *work* betrayed humans as it gradually led to a dependence on labor. Thus, this attraction to *work* was unavoidably followed by humankind’s fall to *animal laborans* (laborer), a shift that occurred more gradually and thus more subtly.

The elevation of laboring was preceded by certain deviations and variations from the traditional mentality of *homo faber* which were highly characteristic of the modern age and which, indeed, arose almost automatically from the very nature of the events that ushered it in. What changed the mentality of *homo faber* was the central position of the concept of process in modernity.¹²

Thus, the Archimedean point: the modern world became one in which life now stood as the highest good of man, where the highest good had previously been *world*.¹³ Humans were no longer related through some connecting influence; instead they became preoccupied with the process involved in living. “The rise of society brought about the

¹¹ Id. at 300

¹² Id. at 306-7

¹³ Id. at 318

simultaneous decline of the public as well as the private realm.”¹⁴ As the public and private realms deteriorated, what had formerly been private emerged into the light of society. The modern age became preoccupied with labor; tasks that in the past had been performed in private where men were not expected to project themselves to others. Homo fabers found themselves being suddenly thrust into the public upon alienation from the world.

Labor and work, however important to humankind fail to adequately place people together in a *world*. Both of these human conditions endure despite isolation from the world; that is, *world is present only when there are men to occupy it and give it meaning*. Labor is necessary for humankind’s continued existence but it does so in a way that creates what Arendt refers to as animal laborans. Animal laborans lack individuality and permanence because their sole objective is survival. Action can only take place in a *world* or in a plurality where human beings can identify themselves to other human beings; consequently action is critical to the future of humankind.¹⁵

Placing work as the focal point of life preceded the fall of action from the place it had previously occupied. Thereafter, humankind was left separated without a *world*, or without a means of discourse. In turn, a work based society preoccupied with consumption and living for the sake of life slowly became a labor based society. “In a world that is empty of meaningful political action and community, the craft of homo

¹⁴ Id. at 257

¹⁵ I will go into further detail regarding plurality in the next section.

faber loses its purpose.”¹⁶ When the shift is made from the work to the product, (this describes the nature of consumption) *homo fabers* are transformed into *animal laborans*. This describes the basic plight of the modern world and how it came to be so.

The loss of boundaries between the once distinct public and private realms only furthered this reality. A modern world of consumption that places major emphasis on making and turning the whole of humankind into laborers renders every human being as mere material that only has a small function in a vast world of production.

Transformation to a modern age of consumption has yielded virtually every object, thing and even person meaningless. Author Leah Bradshaw does a good job of describing the descent from work to labor:

In such a world, crafting can easily become confused with the making of things for their own sake. It is the corruption of the activity of work to think of it as furnishing its own meaning, and this initial corruption leads to an even greater one. Once men start to view products of their own hands as having no other end but to make more products, it is a short step from there to treating all the world, both natural and man-made, as a means to man’s infinite making. Once the leap is made from understanding the objective products of work as being for man’s use to understanding all the world that way, we are in the realms of the animal laborans. Since work is ultimately meaningless without the purpose of political action to sustain its worth, only the mute necessity of life remains to propel man onward. The mastery of *homo faber* degenerates into the slavishness of animal laborans; the objective world declines into the consumer world of modern society.¹⁷

In antiquity, entrance into the public, (or the political realm) was made possible only after an adequate means of support had been attained at home, enabling citizens to participate in political affairs. “What all Greek philosophers, no matter how opposed to

¹⁶ Id. at 18

¹⁷ Bradshaw, p. 18

polis life, took for granted is that freedom is exclusively located in the political realm, that necessity is primarily a pre-political phenomenon, characteristic of the private household organization, and that force and violence are justified in this sphere because they are the only means to master necessity—for instance, by ruling over slaves— and to become free.”¹⁸ In other words, the polis was distinguished from the household in that it knew only equals, whereas the household was the center of the strictest inequality.¹⁹

The Christian era brought with it too some doctrines that influenced the prevalence of the *animal laborans*. “One could no longer with Plato despise the slave for not having committed suicide rather than submit to his master, for to stay alive under all circumstances had become a holy duty, and suicide was regarded as worse than murder.”²⁰ Thus, although the era of Christianity preceded our modern era it left profound effects on humankind that helped usher a laboring society into the world. “[T]he modern age continued to operate under the assumption that life, and not the world, is the highest good of man...it never thought of challenging this fundamental reversal which Christianity had brought into the dying ancient world.”²¹

Private household lives were driven by the need to survive; *labor*. “The institution of slavery in antiquity, though not in later times, was not a device for cheap labor and an instrument of exploitation for profit but rather the attempt to exclude labor from the conditions of man’s life. What men share with all other forms of animal life was not

¹⁸ Arendt, *The Human Condition* p.31

¹⁹ See *Id.* at 32

²⁰ *Id.* at 316

²¹ *Id.* at 318-19

considered to be human.”²² In the public realm, however, all individuals were equal, none being burdened by labor necessary to sustain life. The inequality that existed in the household between the head and the servant made possible equality in the public realm. Persons could take an active role in the political affairs because they were not concerned with the need to survive nor were they preoccupied with crafting permanence in the world by means of their *work*. In the modern world the social and political realms are much less distinct, if there is any distinction left at all.

When faced with competing needs to *labor* and to *act*, men misjudge *labor* as wholly sufficient for survival.²³ The concerns of all things pertaining formerly to the private sphere of the family have become public concerns and the harshness of necessity driven by survival has become a reality of the political as well; there no longer exists a distinction between public and private. Both the public and private realms have been absorbed into the modern idea of the social realm. “In our present day ‘consumer’s society’ we have not used our escape from necessity to pursue other ends, but ‘we have almost succeeded in leveling all human activities to the common denominator of *securing the necessities of life and providing for their abundance*.” This for Arendt demonstrates the complete take-over of action by work and then work by labor.

“Giving those former laborers’ adm[is]sion] and...equal rights in the public realm didn’t raise them to the freemen’s level but pulled freemen down to the laborers’

²² Id.

²³ Id. at 84

level.”²⁴ Once labor has become explicit, the modern world encourages humankind to think of itself as animals governed by natural law.²⁵ When we are laboring “we are not even distinctively human, rather appear merely as animal laborans; in labor we are moved by necessity as an animal.”²⁶

[A]s long as the animal laborans remains in possession of it, there can be no true public realm, but only private activities displayed in the open. The outcome is what is euphemistically called mass culture, and its deep rooted trouble is a universal unhappiness, due on one side to the troubled balance between laboring and consumption and, on the other, to the persistent demands of the animal laborans to obtain a happiness which can be achieved only where life’s processes of exhaustion and regeneration, of pain and release from pain, strike a perfect balance. The universal demand for happiness and the widespread unhappiness in our society... are among the most persuasive signs that we have begun to live in a labor society which lacks enough laboring to keep it contented. For only the animal laborans, and neither the craftsman nor the man of action, has ever demanded to be “happy” or thought that mortal men could be happy.²⁷

If unhappiness and a life laden with consumption are truly interrelated then action is truly critical to the survival of humankind. “What makes action so important is the fact that the essential uniqueness of each person, which action is said to make manifest, is opposed by forces which are quite capable of stymieing its manifestation, forces which Arendt characterizes as the biological and social aspects of human sameness.”²⁸ In this way, action reveals the unitary and unique self that transcends the forces of biological and sociological uniformity. Therefore, despite however powerful the elements opposing

²⁴ McGowan, John. *Hannah Arendt an Introduction*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998. p. 53

²⁵ See Arendt, *The Human Condition* at introduction p. xi

²⁶ McGowan, *Hannah Arendt an Introduction* p. 42

²⁷ Arendt, *The Human Condition* 134

²⁸ Gottsegen 25

uniqueness may be, action is held by Arendt to be more powerful still and capable of triumphing over these individuality denying forces.²⁹

Each person has a contribution for *world* to exist; they add something new and avoid conformism by ushering in new beginnings, change and reason to defend one's individual position; personal identity accomplishes this. Consequently, action permits us to avoid behavior that amounts to conformity when we reveal ourselves to the world. Conformity is dangerous because it permits human beings to follow blindly the lead of ideology. Originality is significant in a plurality because the self-revelatory appearance of each person is unique and true of that particular individual. This also, is why action lies in plurality; distinct acts are only noticed with an audience to view. "Men in the plural, that is, men in so far as they live and move and act in this world, can experience meaningfulness only because they can talk with and make sense to each other and themselves."³⁰

The Public, Political

"Action and speech are the supreme expressions of civilization, for they reveal plurality and freedom as constitutive elements of a distinctly human existence."³¹ Action is not only a human condition but it is key to humanity because it is the instrumentality by which humankind can be individuals *and* preserve themselves (workers) and be of the

²⁹ See *id.*

³⁰ *Id.* at 4

³¹ Bradshaw, introduction p. 3

same kind and survive (laborers). “If men were not distinct, each human being distinguished from any other who is, was, or will ever be, they would need neither speech nor action to make themselves understood.”³² With their acts people are distinctly human in their ability to remain individuals and still be of the same class. “It is only in action that human beings exhibit their capacity for joining together, voluntarily, for the purpose of creating a community in which individuals can distinguish themselves in word and deed.”³³

Instead, modern society expects from each of its members a certain kind of behavior, imposing innumerable and various rules, all of which tend “to normalize” its members, to make them behave, to exclude spontaneous action or outstanding achievement.³⁴ Without plurality, action is futile; left separated from the rest of the world, men will feel no need to be themselves. Personal identity will be lost in a feeling of superfluidity, or the excess of indistinct human beings. Furthermore, preoccupied with the biological need to survive, action is not sought after. If everyone has been removed to isolation, who will act but more importantly, if someone chooses to courageously speak out who will hear. Arendt stresses the significance of action so that human beings will be on guard against attempts to make individuals indistinct and as a reminder that they possess this ability to engage in political action in the first place.

Thus, to act is to enter the world, to become political. “At the center of the ideal polity envisioned by Arendt stands the public space where citizen and fellow citizen join

³² *The Human Condition* 176-77

³³ Bradshaw, p. 101

³⁴ Arendt, *The Human Condition* p. 40

together in action and are bound together by a concern for the common [world].”³⁵

Arendt thus espouses a radically participatory conception of direct democracy. In this political forum human beings relate to one another through speech which demands distinctiveness and originality. Here everyone is afforded the opportunity to be a part of the spontaneity that marks freedom.

For this reason, the public space is the locale in which we are connected to one another as members of a political community. Only by virtue of what is shared in the common realm of the public can we be said to share a world in common with one another at all: such sharing is, in Arendtian parlance, thoroughly political.³⁶ “Vitalist activism-which brings homo faber to an apotheosis, but which also imprisons him within the robotization of a kind of knowledge that calculates without thinking is strongly denounced.”³⁷ As a result, politics at its zenith means the existence of an arena which encourages free, unpredictable action. “With word and deed we insert ourselves into the human world, and this insertion is like a second birth, in which we confirm and take upon ourselves the naked fact of our original physical appearance.”³⁸

Arendt’s essential fear is that humans are unaware of this weapon of action that they possess. Only if humans are equipped with confidence in their ability to implement change by appearing in a world, will humans handle *action* as equally important to survival as *work* and *labor*. Once, the significance of action is made evident and the fact that humans must act to avoid the dangers that lurk behind inaction, human beings should

³⁵ Gottsegen 20

³⁶ Gottsegen 51

³⁷ Kristeva 7

³⁸ Arendt. *The Human Condition* 176-77

eagerly devote themselves to a life that places participation in the political forums at the forefront. The realities of production and worldlessness should suddenly appear undesirable as an adversary of freedom. Worldlessness describes human beings without the ability to disclose themselves to other human beings and thus without any means to connect themselves. Arendt uses the analogy in *the Human Condition* of a group of people surrounding a table during a séance. Worldlessness is comparable to those people left standing there after the table that once connected them has disappeared. Consequently, worldlessness fosters thoughtlessness as it permits people to live without engaging with others. Action affords the ability to exist again in a world which equally permits the necessary functions of *action*, *work* and *labor*.

“To act, see, remember, complete memory through narrative: that seems to be the royal road to the revelation of the who that constitutes, in Arendt, a truly political narration.”³⁹ This spontaneity or originality preserves individuality and prompts change in a world that otherwise becomes complacent and then disappears. “Arendt conceives of action as that which gives birth to the public lives and stories through which human plurality is disclosed.”⁴⁰ It is in action that humans maintain originality and individuality, action projects its agent onto the rest of the world so that there may be discourse. This world of discourse is necessary so that humans can get along together. “Action is the ‘sheer human togetherness’ of human existence in which people disclose themselves to one another.”⁴¹

³⁹ Kristeva 19

⁴⁰ Gottsegen 30

⁴¹ Bradshaw, *Acting and Thinking: The Political Thought of Hannah Arendt* p.16

“One immortalizes one self by becoming a who that acts within political space, thus giving rise only to a memorable narrative.”⁴² Therefore, only those whose rights are secured as those of political equals are positioned to engage in the one endeavor which truly gives life meaning. “Where the legal structure of the polity renders all citizens political equals, as it presumably would in the Arendtian community, it secures to each of them the equal right to step forth into the public space in a self-revelatory manner.”⁴³ For Arendt politics is only useful in its ability to reflect spontaneously and carry out the desires of the masses. This spontaneity and originality found in each person is reflected in politics, or in their actions. For this reason, failure to act deprives humankind of what ultimately separates it from the rest of existence.

Is Action Really Meaningful?

Within her philosophical treatise on the nature of political action, Arendt’s notion of action is consistent with many of her other various conceptions, public and private, pluralism and world, work and homo faber and labor and animal laborans. She also develops novel approaches to the meaning of temporal transcendence and death. These latter categories are often valued highly in philosophy and yet Arendt concerns herself with the lives and stories that create history before death. Still many object to Arendt’s philosophy citing her failure to explain more fully “the existential origin of her chief concepts and ... argue for their adequacy.” This criticism stems with Arendt’s lack of

⁴² Kristeva 19

⁴³ Gottsegen 57

explanation when she renders new meanings to old concepts and when she introduces her own ideas. Critics render this lack thereof as a noteworthy shortcoming of her work “that severely undercuts the persuasive power of her analysis.”⁴⁴ In his critique, Gottsegen writes:

[T]his arrogance of tone- for it is arrogance to present a new basal of categories on a take it or leave it basis- while it may account for the distinctly mixed reception Arendt’s work has received, cannot be reason to dismiss her analysis. That she fails to provide reader with grounds does not make her arguments groundless. Indeed, the cogency of her basic analytic framework is such that it behooves her sympathetic critic to provide such an account of her categories as will explain why Arendt held them to constitute the fundamental ground for thinking about man and politics.⁴⁵

Another criticism may be that Arendt sometimes seems to be a bit extreme in some of her viewpoints. For example, a reader of *The Human Condition*, may get the sense that Arendt is one sided in her narration of history. In other words, Arendt may overstress and/or underestimate the degree to which in normal periods of time, the consequences of her actions are foreseeable. For instance, there were certainly persons who even in totalitarian regimes who *acted* even in the sense that Arendt demands, yet she does not mention them. The response to this may simply be that because she matured during a time of instability, she focused on those time frames and predominate and overwhelming behaviors of persons judging that those few who act and times of peace needed little explanation. Still, Arendt does appear to disregard that state of modern world who do not live in totalitarian fictions. Nonetheless the kernel of Arendt’s insight is sound: discourse is the means by which humanity can be made meaningful.

⁴⁴ Gottsegen 24

⁴⁵ Gottsegen 24

Additionally, some object that Arendt's account of action is less than complete and offers an unsatisfactory guide to which form of government it is that Arendt supports. However, a clear understanding of action demonstrates that it can not be confined to a particular government form. The source of government must be with the humans who occupy the political space. Moreover too many details run the risk of outlining a government that would by definition restrict an individual's ability to act. Originality of humankind renders spontaneity of action and only spontaneity, the guarantee of freedom. More than this, the nature of human beings is such that if in action humans could never perfectly follow the guides of a template politics.

Finally, there is a general consistency apparent throughout Arendt's philosophy. In her, the *Origins of Totalitarianism* she offers an empirical analysis of the development of totalitarianism. This work followed the *Human Condition* and we see manifest in the writing the themes of human beings as vehicles for action and the power of ideology in isolated beings. These ideas are therefore ones that are refined as Arendt's philosophy progresses from that found in the *Human Condition*. The *Human Condition* offers a backdrop that can be placed against a modern assault on pluralism taking place in a modern world. Therefore, Arendt describes and assesses the world permitting totalitarianism, the theme of *Origins of Totalitarianism*.

Furthermore, Arendt's book *Eichmann in Jerusalem* drew similar conclusions about the context of the world and the type of inhabitants that could become victims of ideology. Totalitarian regimes can only reign where humans exist as isolated devoid of world. These regimes are defined by their need to generate and intensify instruments of

terror that have, as one of many forms of domination. And such forms are of course dehumanizing in many ways, one of which is to isolate men from the world (and even from themselves as individuals. Thus, Arendt coins the term “banality of evil.”

Eichmann in Jerusalem gave a comprehensive report on the trial of Adolf Eichmann and as such offered a study of the man. Arendt concluded that Eichmann was no extraordinary person but indifferent to the lurking opportunities made available in a compliant, unpluralistic society. Here we see the development of Arendt’s ideas of the ‘superfluous man’ and the modern’s ‘animal laborans,’ developed in *the Human Condition*.

Each time Arendt visits the plight of humankind she arrives at the same conclusion, each time a bit more refined. Humans must appear to one another in a world to safeguard themselves from totalitarian fictions that pervade our modern world; action is the way by which we can find a remedy. Finally, Arendt’s reliance on action as discourse is evident in all her works, although only *Eichmann Jerusalem* and *Origins of Totalitarianism* specifically concern humans in modern times and totalitarianism. These two books although they concern the Holocaust and totalitarianism more closely than the *Human Condition* lack the philosophical conceptuality and analysis found in the *Human Condition*.

3. ASSAULT ON PLURALITY

Is This an Assault?

Arendt believes that people are revealed through appearance. However appearance presupposes a viewer; one must appear to someone. “Thus he who would disclose his unique self through action does not merely act; rather he acts with and before other persons who are similarly intent upon making an appearance. Action implies community and only in community can men achieve the manifestation of who they are.”⁴⁶ In a modern society that hinders pluralism, it is difficult to find many communities that welcome action. Instead behavioral conformity and uniformity plague modern society because human beings are encouraged to think and act alike. In fact, this conformity can take the form of ethnic, nationalistic and or religious ideology.

When we addressed the significance of Arendt’s ‘natality’ we saw that birth provides the ability to act. However, in a modern society where worldlessness prevails, action is unavailable for public display. As such, humans neglect the gift that makes them distinctively *human*. As *animal laborans* human beings live amongst one another without the revelatory quality that distinguishes them as human in the first place.

⁴⁶ Gottsegen 27

Arendt wants to remind us that “men, not Man inhabit the world.”⁴⁷ *Labor* and *work* do not require *world*. When we neglect pluralism, we lose a *world* in which we can display ourselves and in the process we lose sight of ourselves. We become entangled in the hardships of the *animal laborans*. Exacerbated entanglement predicates world alienation as humans are encouraged to shun any concept of world. Isolation and worldlessness is perpetuated by causing people to become preoccupied with affairs of survival that can be completed in isolation. “As both the horrors of our age, and the bovine existence of the masses make clear, the tendency of man to succumb to necessity remains strong.”⁴⁸

Labor and the consumption that accompanies it, lack originality and individuality because they are calculable; a product of behavior. People are bound to labor and work and as a result left without a “place in the *world*.” This is also characteristic of totalitarian forms of government; an effort to rally together worldless human beings, except totalitarianism robs human beings of their humanity.

For Arendt, the modern age has fostered an unprecedented amount of world alienation and loneliness; worldlessness shoulders the loss of identity and these lay the foundation for the experience of radical loneliness; an uprootedness deprives human beings of any relation to the world. Ultimately, this leads the modern being into the hands of ideology. Having lost contact with fellow beings and reality (a contact underwritten by a stable and vibrant public realm), the modern individual loses the

⁴⁷ Bradshaw, p. 103

⁴⁸ Gottsegen 39

capacity for both thought and experience.⁴⁹ Susceptibility to totalitarian fictions develops, Arendt writes “...scheme after scheme has been elaborated for perfect societies in which everyone conforms to the author’s blueprint.

The Holocaust occurred under the rule of the Nazi regime, a totalitarian structure that held out the promise of a government that could perfect unstable society. We take note, “[t]he curious sterility of utopias comes from the absence within them of any scope for initiative, any room for plurality.”⁵⁰ Arendt shows that philosophers since Plato have attempted to substitute a made politics in place of action and thus her major complaint against modernity is that it does not provide the proper place- the political realm- where the full plurality of identities could be generated through action undertaken with and in front of others.⁵¹ Moreover, she argues that “the mistake made by all political philosophers has been to ignore the fundamental condition of politics: that it goes on among *plural* human beings, each of whom can act and start something new.”⁵²

“Arendt concludes that the manifestation of uniqueness in the public sphere will be jeopardized so long as this sphere is ‘contaminated’ by [] species uniformity and biological necessity.”⁵³ The rise of totalitarian regimes reveal the radical denaturing and deindividualization of human beings like that which preceded the Holocaust and the growth thereafter of a supremely pliable animal species devoid of world.⁵⁴ Arendt

⁴⁹ See Bergen, *The Banality of Evil: Hannah Arendt and the Final Solution* p.52

⁵⁰ McGowan 9 maybe Bradshaw 101

⁵¹ McGowan, p. 38

⁵² Arendt *The Human Condition* at introduction p. ix

⁵³ Gottsegen63

⁵⁴ Bergen, Bernard. *The Banality of Evil: Hannah Arendt and the Final Solution*. Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 1998. p. 189

stresses, therefore that human beings must “think what is that they are doing.”⁵⁵ And so if Arendt appears dramatic about the implications of cultivating a society of inactive persons displaced from a *world*, it is because she had lived through the rise and fall of the Nazi state. In acts of ‘sheer thoughtlessness’ she observed that humans had the capacity to destroy what it means to be human. Arendt struggled with the same question we grapple with today: ‘how could this happen?’

Arendt’s study of Hitler, her relation with Heidegger, her Jewish heritage and her examination of the surrounding world led her to critique traditional philosophical explanations of human nature. Neither Plato nor Aristotle advocated equal access to the political realm, both trusted the election of better equipped delegates. It was tradition that had encouraged humans to synchronize their thought process; it was tradition that ultimately bore thoughtlessness. Arendt offered the sequence she deemed necessary to effect superfluous beings. Initially, there had to occur “the destruction of juridical or political man by placing him outside the law.”⁵⁶ Subsequently, the moral person was destroyed “by rendering his conscience impotent”⁵⁷, and finally “by eliminating his uniqueness and spontaneity, the human individual was destroyed.”⁵⁸

Superfluous beings conform to the current ideology in an attempt to substitute for their displacement from a *world*. As such, these beings are *animal laborans*; they readily behave as if mechanical thoughtlessness and behavior are obligations and without ever

⁵⁵ *The Human Condition*

⁵⁶ Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* 447-454

⁵⁷ Arendt *The Origins of Totalitarianism* at id.

⁵⁸ Id.

stopping to introduce meaning into their lives. Characteristic of production-ridden lives, they become engulfed in the rhythm of life and never consider the end, life itself.

Thus, the Holocaust involved “the total collapse of all established moral standards.”⁵⁹ Elizabeth M. Meade, in her paper *The Commodification of Values*⁶⁰ writes:

When politicians today speak of the collapse of moral standards, they often mean that the standards themselves would still be valid if we could only get people to adhere to them once more. What Arendt meant, I think, was that the standards themselves collapsed, that they could not bear the weight they were supposed to measure. The standards proved inadequate both in preventing and later in comprehending the enormity of the crimes. The moral challenge lie not with those who masterminded the Holocaust- history has known evil people before and will surely know them again- but with the ordinary, generally good people “who only ‘coordinated’ themselves and did not act out of conviction.”⁶¹

The remarkability of what could be lost prompted Arendt’s position that a lack of action would predicate a loss of morality and likewise humanity. Meade goes on to explain the collapse:

The moral standards, which had evolved over centuries of religious and philosophical thought and had been taught to generations of pious schoolchildren could not prevent whole nations of people from turning on their Jewish populations, from bearing false witness, from collaborating in murder. And later, after the war, when the presumed madness was over, the language of moral standards seemed curiously inadequate to describe what had gone on...no one had to be a convinced Nazi to conform, and to forget overnight, as it were, not his social status, but the moral convictions which once went with it”⁶²

Understanding the Holocaust in light of Arendt’s discoveries should motivate the masses to revere humanity once again and to be cautious against fictitious ideals delivered with the purpose of controlling human beings one community at a time. If

⁵⁹ Arendt, “Some Questions of Moral Philosophy” lecture series given at the New School for Social Research in 1965.

⁶⁰ Meade, Elizabeth, *Commodification of Values*. Hannah Arendt (ed. Kohn) p.110

⁶¹ Meade, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* 110

⁶² Id.

ordinary beings could, without remorse, dehumanize other ordinary beings, if ordinary beings could carry on as though they had no power to resist then we had better take the time to understand how it is that the Holocaust came about because we are all ordinary beings living in a similar world.

Conformism

Arendt writes in *The Human Condition*:

The monolithic character of every type of society, its conformism which allows for only one interest and one opinion, is ultimately rooted in the one-ness of mankind. It is because this one-ness of man-kind is not fantasy and not even merely a scientific hypothesis, as in the 'communistic fiction' of classical economics, that mass society, where man as a social animal rules supreme and where apparently the survival of the species could be guaranteed on a world-wide scale, can at the same time threaten humanity with extinction."⁶³

The Holocaust could happen only after the circumstances that give rise to our modern society had presented themselves. Human beings had become *animal laborans* almost unconsciously and had slowly misplaced their desire to act. In time this neglect caused them to forget its existence altogether; ceasing to act had caused these beings to forget the power of action and so they lost the ideal altogether.

Thus, Meade in *Commodification of Values*, later writes, "[w]hat almost all moral philosophers since Socrates have taken for granted is that in most situations people know the difference between right and wrong, and consequently know the correct course of

⁶³ Id. at 46

action.”⁶⁴ But the Holocaust provides evidence that it is not always safe to assume that people know the difference between right and wrong. After all, why else would people so willingly concede to the state the Nazi regime had put in place? “A noticeable decrease in common sense in any given community and a noticeable increase in superstition and gullibility are therefore almost infallible signs of alienation from the world.”⁶⁵ Without a *world* in which one could judge and be judged, human beings lose sight of morals; morality exists between human beings. “Nobody, as Marx insisted, seen ‘in his isolation produces values’ and nobody, he could have added, in his isolation cares about them; things or ideals ‘become values only in their social relationship.’”⁶⁶

Ordinary men became the perpetrators. “Hitler was surrounded by the hysterical adoration and blind faith of so many, for so long, that well after [the victory of] Stalingrad, . . . , countless Germans still believed in his promises of victory.”⁶⁷ It was not hatred that had fueled their behavior but rather indifference. Those who composed ‘the masses’ simply cared more about being a part of something than they were enthused by what it actually was that they were doing.⁶⁸ “The willingness to accept the ideological elements of a totalitarian state,” Arendt said, “can be successful only when man has degenerated into *animal laborans*, that is, when men have already become isolated and

⁶⁴ Meade 111

⁶⁵ *The Human Condition* 208

⁶⁶ Id. at 165

⁶⁷ Friedlander, 657

⁶⁸ This account refers to the vast majority during this period and not intended to undermine the few instances in which men had not given in to conformism.

worldless.”⁶⁹ The division of the people into ruled and rulers demonstrated the assault upon, and a constraint of this basic human capacity for action.

The masses found themselves separated, and isolated and so ultimately they were rendered insignificant. These would readily pledge allegiance to any organization that would give them a place to occupy in the world, even a fictitious one. “By the masses... [Arendt] means people who would in any stable society be perfectly content to fill the role to which they were born but found themselves cut-off...”⁷⁰ It is characteristic, then, of totalitarianism, that the masses attract those without any particular conviction who can devote themselves to whatever ideology prevails. Society always demands that its members act as though they were members of one enormous family which has only one opinion and one interest.⁷¹ What comes across as inexplicable is the way in which victims and perpetrators operated as if they had no choice in their behavior. “[B]oth evidently feeling that they had no choice, no opportunity for action, in going through their ritual but merely obeying forces greater than human wills.”⁷²

“Men are free to choose how they should act. That they tend to act in accordance with various deterministic conceptions and seldom resist these promptings does not mean that they are unable to do so.”⁷³ What could take place in the absence of action is so appalling in part because we know how powerful action is. “[T]he trouble with men of

⁶⁹ Bradshaw, p. 45

⁷⁰ Canovan 20

⁷¹ Id. at 39

⁷² Canovan The Political Thought of Hannah Arendt 18

⁷³ Gottsegen 29

critical thought,” and action I might add “is that they make pillars [that support our most closely held] truths shake wherever they let their eyes fall (Lessing).”⁷⁴

The Ghettos, The Camps

In a society of *animal laborans*, human beings do not see other human beings. Without the discourse that reveals individual stories, human authenticity is lost. Distinct *beings* disappear into the masses of *beings*; their existence becomes superfluous. “[T]he *animal laborans* does not flee the world but is ejected from it...”⁷⁵ “His encounter with the world assumes his freedom; it assumes his ability to will himself against that within himself which is not truly himself and against that that which is not particular to his identity but is merely common to species. The limit and essential antagonist of freedom is necessity.”⁷⁶

Thus, Jewish men, women and children were removed from their homes and neighborhoods sent initially to ghettos and then concentration camps without causing too much attention. No audience took note of their absence. If human beings could be removed from the world they would lose the ability to project their humanity to the rest

⁷⁴ Hermsen, Joke J. “Who” is the Spectator? Hannah Arendt and Simone Weil on Thinking and Judging (The Judge and Spectator) Hermsen and Villa

⁷⁵ HC118

⁷⁶ Gottsegen 27

of the world. Therefore, the victims were made helpless without a forum to reveal their plight causing them to accept their plight without much resistance.

Before the camps, the Jews were hauled off to ghettos away from the rest of society and made to be slave laborers. This initial choice to tear the Jews from their homes and make them slave laborers was strategic and effective in severing notions of humanity from the Jews. “The slave’s degradation was a blow of fate worse than death, because it carried with it a metamorphosis of man into something akin to a tame animal.”⁷⁷ Approaching what occurred and keeping this in mind not only helps us to understand how vital acting is to human beings but it enables us to recognize why the victims did not resist more. The inside of the ghettos, the concentration camps and finally the killing centers that all implemented isolation from the rest of society were effective in cementing their place apart from the world and thus their loss of identity. Prior to this Jews were made to be like to animals as forced laborers and this continued right up to the death of many Jews. Without an audience to witness their sufferings and tucked away in isolation as means to an end they became subhuman to their aggressors.

In Elie Wiesel’s *Night* he describes the victims after they were made to leave the Gleweitz camp and march some three days without food or drink:

They brought us bread- the usual ration. We threw ourselves upon it. Someone had the idea of appeasing his thirst by eating the snow. Soon the others were imitating him. As we were not allowed to bend down, everyone took out his

⁷⁷ HC84

spoon and ate the accumulated snow on his neighbor's back. A mouthful of bread and a spoonful of snow. The SS who were watching laughed at this spectacle.⁷⁸

A report devised by Nazi security police, notes how the victims were cast as lifeless commodities:

[T]he vans "had processed 97,000" since 1941, without any visible defects. Nonetheless, he suggested a series of six major technical improvements to deal more efficiently with the 'the number of pieces' usually loaded in each van.⁷⁹

The Third Reich's conception began with the Nazi rise to power which brought an end to the previous republic, a parliamentary democracy established in Germany after World War I. Following the appointment of Adolf Hitler as chancellor, the Nazi state quickly became a regime in which Germans enjoyed no guaranteed basic rights.

In the first months of Hitler's chancellorship, the Nazis instituted a policy of "coordination"--the alignment of individuals and institutions with Nazi goals. Culture, the economy, education, and law all came under Nazi control. The Nazi regime also attempted to "coordinate" the German churches and, although not entirely successful, won support from a majority of Catholic and Protestant clergymen. Extensive propaganda was used to spread the regime's goals and ideals. Upon the death of German president Paul von Hindenburg in August 1934, Hitler assumed the powers of the presidency. The army swore an oath of personal loyalty to him.⁸⁰

The numbers that were imprinted into the victims' skin were placed there in an effort to solidify loss of individuality. A plurality cannot exist when work is taken over by labor and humans live solely to produce. Moreover, many cooperated with such gruesome terms because the plurality had been erased and because of the group urge to conform. The men, women and children moved into these ghettos were placed there

⁷⁸ Wiesel, Elie. *Night* 92

⁷⁹ Friedrich, Saul 363

⁸⁰ United States Holocaust Museum, www.ushmm.org

because they were seen as a species of laborers precisely because they had been dehumanized. “Action without a name, a ‘who’ attached to it, is meaningless”...and actors in such a predicament are robbed of their human dignity.⁸¹ It is easy to see why action is central to Arendtian philosophy because without it people lose their humanity. In the discussion of the ghettos we can talk about what Arendt refers to as the superfluousness of human beings. How did we get to the point where these ghettos and camps became feasible? “To men the reality of the world is guaranteed by the presence of others, by its appearing to all; ‘for what appears to all, this we call Being,’ and whatever lacks this appearance comes and passes away like a dream, intimately and exclusively our own but without reality.”⁸²

This was reinforced by the conditions of the housing units; they would be reminiscent of beings that were less than human. This was fitting, where the aim had been to remove all identities and create an anonymity that reduced the men and women to animals. “Labor’s products, the products of man’s metabolism with nature, do not stay in the world long enough to become part of it, and the laboring activity itself, concentrated exclusively on life and its maintenance, is oblivious of the world to the point of worldlessness...”⁸³ Later in *Night*, Wiesel wrote what he was told by the head of the block once his father had become deathly ill and Wiesel had been saving half of his ration to feed his father:

⁸¹ *The Human Condition* 180

⁸² Id. at 199- Aristotle in quote

⁸³ Bradshaw, p. 15

Listen to me, boy. Don't forget that you're in a concentration camp. Here, every man has to fight for himself and not think of anyone else. Even of his father. Here there are no fathers, no brothers, no friends. Everyone lives and dies for himself alone. I'll give you a sound piece of advice- don't give your ration of bread and soup to your old father. There's nothing you can do for him. And you're killing yourself. Instead, you ought to be having his ration.⁸⁴

In his book, *the Years of Extermination*, Saul Friedlander describes the account of a Jewish victim awaiting news of freedom from the Russian army:

We all proclaimed it, we were all sure of it, but at bottom nobody believed it. Because one loses the habit of hoping in the Lager [the camp], and even of believing in one's own reason. In the Lager it is useless to think, because events happen for the most part in an unforeseeable manner; and it is harmful, because it keeps alive a sensitivity which is the source of pain, and which some providential natural law dulls when suffering passes a limit.⁸⁵

“They themselves do not ‘produce’ or bring forth anything; they are as futile as life itself. In order to become worldly things, that is, deeds and facts and events and patterns of thoughts or ideas, they must first be seen, heard, and remembered...”⁸⁶

Notably, there were attempts to escape such a fate but sadly many, too many accepted their fate. The Nazis wanted to destroy any will but more importantly they wanted to erase the Jewish existence. If their plight could be hidden from an audience, unseen and unheard by anyone else the victims themselves fade from human existence as if they never existed.

⁸⁴ Wiesel, 105

⁸⁵ Friedlander, Saul 651

⁸⁶ *Human Condition* 95

The Final Solution

The Final Solution would bring an end to what the aggressors had attempted to render meaningless; there would be nothing left to remember them by. “By exterminating these pests, we shall do humanity a service of which our soldiers can have no idea.”⁸⁷ Upon placing the Jews in the ghettos, the Nazis destroyed all Jewish art and work and thus there would be no work to preserve their existence. The Jews, themselves, had been reduced to laborers and labor doesn’t entail permanence. Total eradication is only possible in a world where “men have become entirely private,” that is, they have been deprived of seeing and hearing others, of being seen and being heard by them. They are all imprisoned in the subjectivity of their own singular experience, which does not cease to be singular if the same experience is multiplied innumerable times. ⁸⁸

Arendt links selfhood and spontaneity when she observes that the Nazis sought to obliterate the notion of self in concentration camp inmates by denying them any opportunity for any spontaneous action. She understood that in isolation, tucked away from the rest of humanity, persons could more easily lose a sense of humanity for themselves. To be deprived of the audience was to have the identity destroyed. Spontaneous action is the manifestation of the true self, that element of uniqueness which

⁸⁷ Friedlander, Saul. 273

⁸⁸ Arendt, p. 39

is something deeper, more inward and more essential than all those sociological and biological factors which press toward uniformity.⁸⁹

“[O]mnipotence always implies- apart from its utopian hubris- the destruction of plurality.”⁹⁰ Progression from action to work and then work to labor in a society of consumption is evident in the plausibility of the Final Solution. What did the gas chambers symbolize? From the point of view of Nazi ideology the systematic annihilation of Jews followed from the theory of racial supremacy and was a necessary and inevitable deduction.⁹¹ “In other words, the distinction between productive and unproductive labor contains, albeit in a prejudicial manner, the more fundamental distinction between work and labor. It is indeed the mark of all laboring that it leaves nothing behind, that the result of its effort, despite its futility, is born of a great urgency and motivated by a more powerful drive than anything else, because life itself depends upon it.”⁹²

“Ideological appeals could be successful, Arendt argues, only because, in an unreliable and disordered world, the masses had taken refuge in that worldless logical faculty to which ideology appeals.”⁹³ The Final Solution was the ultimate manifestation of humankind’s natural selfishness. The desire to rid “the world” of human beings because they are different in appearance and/or beliefs. “What totalitarian ideologies therefore aim at is not the transformation of society, but the transformation of human

⁸⁹ Gottsegen 47

⁹⁰ *The Human Condition* 202

⁹¹ Canovan 19

⁹² *The Human Condition* 87

⁹³ Gottsegen 89

nature itself. The concentration camps are the laboratories where changes in human nature are tested, and their shamefulness therefore is not just the business of their inmates and those who run them according to strictly “scientific” standards; it is the concern of all men.”⁹⁴

Without action, the victims’ lose their humanity and without action the aggressors become monsters in an effort to act in concert. I chose to focus on the Holocaust because it is highly documented and because of its modernity. It is, of course, not the only occurrence which we could use but one that is familiar to most of our memories.

Mass murder, genocide, unbearable large-scale suffering by innocent people, systematic torture and terror had happened before in history. But the aim of totalitarianism was not oppression, not even “total domination”- if this is still understood as the total domination of *human beings*. Totalitarianism, as Arendt understood it, strives to obliterate one’s humanity and the very conditions required to live a human life.⁹⁵

The attempt at total domination is much more significant than the identity of those who constitute the enemy. This is not to be understood as ignorance of the specific circumstances, such an approach would act only as an aid to the aim of the perpetrators. They want to erase the victims’ identity and histories, so recognizing the specific instances is important, but it is also important as I endeavor to do here, to understand the large picture where we see that totalitarianism doesn’t have one face.

There was nothing original about anti-semitism, but in actually making proof of Non-Jewish blood a qualification for party membership the Nazis provided their

⁹⁴ Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* 458-59

⁹⁵ Meade 137

members with a means of self-definition as a matter of race, so that the most ordinary Nazi gained a feeling not only of belonging, but of belonging to an elite.⁹⁶

The content is insightful but unnecessary to understand how the story works. Atrocity, sadly enough, did not end with the Jewish Holocaust; it began. Worldlessness has provided the context for miniature Holocausts throughout the world. In contemporary times, who the enemy is will vary depending on location but the process of 'becoming the enemy' the road to victimization and terrorism takes the same course. Atrocity appears when the world is complacent and people are isolated. The Final Solution was the Nazi policy to murder the Jews of Europe, an endeavor to advance this type of monolithic society. It was in fact an attempt at this extinction of humanity.

⁹⁶ Canovan 21

4. VICTIMS OF WORLDLESSNESS

Courage

Concentration camps, which reproduced the existential situation of the modern masses as worldless, bewildered beings, functioned as laboratories of total domination aiming to reduce inmates into bundles of conditioned responses; the ultimate intention, Arendt believed, was to turn society at large into a camp in which freedom, spontaneity and plurality as such could be extinguished.⁹⁷

Worldlessness is the lack of human beings acting distinctly as themselves together in a common place. Worldless beings are characterized by their uniformity in behavior and opinion. Worldlessness is the foundation for atrocity. The Holocaust and similarly egregious occurrences of our modern times, destroy human life only after having abolished the *meaning* of all lives. When human beings have lost meaning they lose distinctiveness and they become superfluous, many replicas of the same unvarying being. Moreover, this superfluity of human life, ...,does not disappear-on the contrary- in modern democracies that are dominated by automation.⁹⁸ Rather, terror and atrocious events flourish as we rely more heavily on consumption and production. The developments of our modern culture facilitate the destruction of human life. Arendt wrote of superfluous beings in our modern society:

⁹⁷ Hinchman, Totalitarianism and Evil 3

⁹⁸ Kristeva 4

[W]e may say that radical evil has emerged in connection with a system in which all men have become equally superfluous. The manipulators of this system believe in their own superfluosness as much as that of all the others, and the totalitarian murderers are all the more dangerous because they do not care if they themselves are *alive or dead*, if they have ever *lived* or never were *born*. The danger of the corpse factories and holes of oblivion is that today, with populations and homelessness everywhere on the increase, masses of people are continuously rendered superfluous if we continue to think of our world in utilitarian terms. Political, social and economic events everywhere are in silent conspiracy with totalitarian instruments devised for making men superfluous.⁹⁹

To be human is our ability to act to step out from the private into the political. To be courageous is to take the initiative to act. If from birth we are fully immersed in society, without a private realm in which we can withdraw and get familiar with ourselves, the self that we develop into will always be a mere extension of society. It is in the private realm where one develops a sense of self that is to be displayed to the world. Courage is the ability to go against the grain. One needs time away from the world to recognize that there is an alternative to whatever the prevailing ideology may be.

In a modern world there is little distinction between public and private and thus one is forced into society. Here everything is merged. In such an environment, conformism is highly probable (not inevitable because there are many who can and do resist) because no sense of self is ever developed. The world is thus inhabited by normalized beings because few have the courage to act or to speak out against wrong. There is little courage because they have been dehumanized. Without the private realm it is much more difficult for people to learn what it means to act; to be human. It is easier for aggressors to view worldless men as animals that are to be treated as such. In such a

⁹⁹ Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* 459

world it is critical that one is able to maintain self; in a world flooded with ideology and tactics to conform. The resistant strand found in courage is necessary and can be critical to existence.

Arendt is not referring here to the private realm in the sense that it necessitates a labor-stricken slave class but only as the alternative to the public, political realm. Today we experience a type of intimate realm, where we leave behind our hobbies, interests and secrets. However, this intimate does not amount to a private realm. The intimate are those things that have come into existence in society and then are withheld from spectators of the world. This progression of development in the public and then later withdrawal from the world is insufficient for identity since coming into self should take place before *world*-submersion. One needs an adequate coming into self (to develop courage) in order to show his/herself, to act in the political.

Courage is needed to prevent and/ or to defend against conformist society. Courage can break up what can lead quickly to atrocity. In face of this threat, Arendt constructs a vehement defense of life in the *Human Condition* at the opposite extreme to life that is just routinely reproduced in the spirit of consumerism.

Appearing to others without transcendence from private to public will manifest itself eventually as behavioral uniformity.

The nature of the labor process, she argues, presupposes the essential similarity, and hence the interchangeability, of all persons to a degree that strips those who labor under such conditions of the awareness of their own uniqueness and that of others. Moreover, lacking this sense for human plurality, such persons are ill-equipped to acquire the common sense that presupposes such awareness and are likely to become easy prey for the ideologies to which those lacking common sense are most susceptible. Arendt also insists that the laborer's life-activity is

devoid of the experiences that impart an appreciation for enduring things and for what deserves to endure, both of which are, in her view, essential presuppositions of worldliness.¹⁰⁰

Invasive, negative, violent ideology introduced into a conformist society is a recipe for atrocity. Thus, in the next section we will take a look at contemporary atrocity.

Contemporary Atrocity

“Although the Cold War and other circumstances that conditioned Arendt’s thinking have lapsed, certain broader trends and phenomena that she described make her writings seem almost prescient.”¹⁰¹ Saul Friedlander, historian and writer of *The Extermination Years* made the observation that “[t]he persecution and extermination of the Jews was but a secondary consequence of major German policies pursued toward entirely different goals.”¹⁰² This is important because it helps us understand that atrocious events are a form that can happen in any place and with any history; they are not linked to any one particular group or people or history. Oftentimes those with subtle, nearly unapparent differences are forced together to forge a history; ethnic identity is based on this history. Any history, with enough minor dissimilarities is enough to suffice for the making of “an enemy.” Any enemy can be dehumanized. Once a human being is dehumanized any number of gross tactics are reasonable; they are not human, they are animals.

¹⁰⁰ Gottsegen 78

¹⁰¹ Hinchman, Lewis. Hannah Arendt Critical Essay. Introduction p. xvii

¹⁰² Friedlander, Saul. *The Years of Extermination*. Intro xvi

Although these pillars of ethnic identity seem real to the people in each group, it may be nearly impossible for an outsider to know the difference in history by viewing two neighbors from different ethnic groups side by side. The “them” that was created subtly overtime retains the status of a source for grief; the continued the legacy of turmoil that is brought upon the other group’s predecessors. When there is little or no assimilation to eliminate “us” and “them”, groups hold onto their collective memories of calamity that once befell the group’s ancestors. Ethnic wars are noted for their shocking brutality. They often include deliberate attacks on civilians, taking no mercy on women and children, and involve alarming rates of torture and abuse.

These tactics were revealed during the Holocaust and have become widespread in present times. The thoughtlessness, cruelty and lack of motive are characteristic of a modern world. This becomes apparent in a single point: we live in a society that permits massive killing for no reason. Previously before human beings were demoted to laborers and a means in the production process, men went to war to and killed *men* because they believed that they were *men*; in the other’s ability to act their existence was threatened.

In our modern world, men kill others in massive, inhumane ways because they do not perceive the victims as human. And our society has provided the place for inaction; inhumanity. In contemporary war, neither women or children are spared when once they were made slaves and allowed to live. Absent action, selfish motives are catalyzed. We see evidence of this in contemporary times. The Holocaust describes a model evidenced today in mass war, rape and destruction world wide.

An example of this is in Bosnia- Herzegovina, where an especially brutal civil war was started by the Serbs, who carried out a policy called ethnic cleansing against Muslim civilians.¹⁰³ In 1992, the U.S. and European Community chose to recognize the independence of Bosnia, a mostly Muslim country where the Serb minority made up thirty two percent of the population. The response was an attack by the Serbians on Bosnia's, capital city, Sarajevo. Sarajevo soon became known as the city where Serb snipers continually shot down helpless civilians in the streets, including eventually over 3,500 children.

As a result, Bosnian Muslims were hopelessly outgunned. As the Serbs gained ground, they began systematically to round up local Muslims in scenes eerily similar to those that had occurred under the Nazis.¹⁰⁴ Those included but were not limited to mass shootings, forced repopulation of entire towns, and confinement in make-shift concentration camps for men and boys. The Serbs also terrorized Muslim families into fleeing their villages by using rape as a weapon against women and girls. The actions of the Serbs were labeled as 'ethnic cleansing,' a name which quickly took hold among the international media.

Despite media reports of the secret camps, the mass killings, as well as the destruction of Muslim mosques and historic architecture in Bosnia, the world community remained mostly indifferent. The U.N. responded by imposing economic sanctions on Serbia and also deployed its troops to protect the distribution of food and medicine to

¹⁰³ Encyclopedia Britannica, Bosnia and Herzegovina

¹⁰⁴ Encyclopedia Britannica, Bosnia and Herzegovina

dispossessed Muslims. But the U.N. strictly prohibited its troops from interfering militarily against the Serbs. Thus they remained steadfastly neutral no matter how bad the situation became.

Throughout 1993, confident that the U.N., United States and the European Community would not take military action, Serbs in Bosnia freely committed genocide against Muslims. Bosnian Serbs operated under the local leadership of Radovan Karadzic, president of the illegitimate Bosnian Serb Republic. Karadzic had once told a group of journalists, "Serbs and Muslims are like cats and dogs. They cannot live together in peace. It is impossible."

Today in Bosnia, even after the war, ethnic groups in the area still have many challenges. The country has made some progress, however, even after elections with parties to represent both groups there still exist many points of contention for the parties. Finally, many war victims and criminals are still awaiting trial for humanitarian crimes.

Similarly, in 1994, the Rwandan Genocide was the mass killing of hundreds of thousands of Rwanda's minority Tutsis and the moderates of its Hutu majority. Over the course of approximately 100 days, from early April to the middle of July, at least 500,000 people were killed. Most estimates are of a death toll between 800,000 and 1,000,000.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰⁵ Rwanda: How the genocide happened, BBC, April 1, 2004, which gives an estimate of 800,000, and OAU sets inquiry into Rwanda genocide, Africa Recovery, Vol. 12 1#1 (August 1998), page 4, which estimates the number at between 500,000 and 1,000,000.

No other recent conflict in Africa has taken as high a toll in such a short period of time as the Rwanda genocide, in which between half a million and a million people were massacred. From April to July 1994, extremist political groups organized the massacre, directed primarily at the minority Tutsi ethnic group, but also against those from the Hutu majority who opposed the killings or had been active in the pro-democracy movement. The slaughter ended when rebel forces of the Rwandese Patriotic Front (RPF) overthrew the genocidal government. However, ongoing political tensions, guerrilla warfare and massive refugee movements have continued to sow political instability and humanitarian crises throughout the Great Lakes region, including in neighbouring Burundi and the Democratic Republic of Congo (formerly Zaire).¹⁰⁶

Again, international forces were delayed and ultimately too late in their response efforts. Furthermore, wartime rape in both of these places as well as in various places around the world act as an instrument of war by implementing terrorism and torture, which acts to force its victims into submission

Another place that is currently undergoing crisis is Darfur. The acts of crime here all reflect the rendering of human beings as inhumane. And what has been the international response? As the death toll rises in Darfur, the price of gas and trading price of football stars are what dominate the headlines. Consumption has truly overridden our sense of value and common sense. Consumption has overridden the desire for self preservation; it has dismantled the meaning of humanity. Whereas life was once guided by the desire for immortality and being remembered by the world (history) we have become preoccupied with and to our detriment, stuck in the present.

“Jewishness” and its distinct history although vital in Hitler’s motives are hardly relevant to the model behind atrocity. We see the same form filled with different ethnicity, looks, characteristics, etc. in our modern world. Nazism and Stalinism are two

¹⁰⁶ Global security. Org, Rwanda Civil War c2000-2008

faces of one same horror, totalitarianism, because they converge in *the same denial of human life*.¹⁰⁷

Terror destroys the public space entirely because it can literally prevent people from communicating with one another. Without the freedom to share their fears and concerns people are coerced by terror into maddening isolation of their own thoughts or into the mute obedience of a mass. The effects of terror in a totalitarian state, isolating human beings and preventing them from participating in any kind of intersubjective plurality, showed in a sense the practical consequences of treating human beings as isolated entities. ‘Total domination,’ Arendt said, ‘strives to organize the infinite plurality and differentiation of human beings as if all of humanity were just one individual.’¹⁰⁸

Contemporary atrocity is rooted in the same spirit and structure found in the Holocaust.

“Deterministic narratives reduce all human activity to behavior and thus that neglect which Arendt calls natality.”¹⁰⁹ The final solution meant an attempt to remove the plurality characteristic of humankind. Humans are reduced to animals by making them uniform. The way humans assent to treat other humans as animals, is by conformism. For both of these to take place, it is necessary to escape plurality.

If we keep our understanding of humanity simple we can add in all the fine distinctions of sex, culture, religion, etc. and understand those to be variables for humanity *while* there is no one prescribed formula for being considered human. Moreover, “the others” become subhuman as they lose traits that the initial ethnic group shares. “They” lack compassion, do not feel pain and experience turmoil, or “they do not have their own glorious histories” are examples of the loss of humanistic traits. These dissimilarities escalate, the greater the conflict.

¹⁰⁷ Kristeva 4

¹⁰⁸ Id. at 41

¹⁰⁹ McGowan, p. 55

Rarely is there any empathy for the enemy and the enemy is considered fearless. The more stressful the situation the less groups sympathize with the others. Eventually, the other group is viewed as lesser human species; in extreme cases “they” are not human at all. When this becomes the case it does appear that war is inevitable. *For however cruel it may seem to slaughter a human being, it is nothing to kill an animal.* With the death there is no attached guilt, instead taking the life is more likely the honorable thing to do. The murder takes on a symbolic meaning and it is not just bloodshed; the more inhumane the better the job has been done.

Reestablishing a Political Forum

“This is an unwritten and never to be written page of our glory in history.”¹¹⁰

The above quote was the last line of a speech given to chief subordinates by an SS officer during the Holocaust when referring to the Final Solution. The speaker was himself aware of the power of discourse and narrative. In an effort to rob Jews and the other victims of a history, the Nazis made an effort to omit them from the history books. The predicament of the Jewish victims was to prove resilient to an effort to eliminate them from being mentioned in public; they were to be erased as if they had never existed. Of course, this did not happen but this should emphasize what can be accomplished in action.

¹¹⁰ Lauren, Paul. Power and Prejudice. 145

Discourse is a form of action and is essential to humankind's plurality; plurality is essential for discourse. "If actors, at least in their social capacities, desire, believe and therefore do only what is socially expected of them, then they need no separate understanding."¹¹¹ Atrocity results when humanity becomes uniform; Arendt's philosophy serves to remind us that as long as some people exist with the ability to act they can interrupt attempts to extinguish others. In other words, we can get back to acting. If we can reestablish political forums we can in effect reconnect human beings with each other to form a world. "[H]uman actions have meaning"¹¹² and for this reason they enable people to engage in discourse. "They embody intentions, express emotions are done for reasons and are influenced by ideas about value."¹¹³

The Human Condition serves to remind us that freedom's preservation demands a relatively stable human artifice of the sort isolation makes impossible. Arendt thought that the magnitude of crimes warranted trial by the entire human race.¹¹⁴ The Final solution as the many other atrocious events that have taken place in our modern world, should teach us all how absolutely indispensable such a realm of stability is, and how destructive the principle of unlimited dynamism (instantiated in the restless activism of the totalitarian movements themselves) can be.¹¹⁵ "The crime of genocide requires that

¹¹¹ Hollis, Martin. *The Philosophy of Social Science*. 18

¹¹² Hollis. *The Philosophy of Social Science*. 144

¹¹³ Id.

¹¹⁴ See Bradshaw, p. 45

¹¹⁵ Arendt, 187

all human beings inquire into the nature of justice, the limits of action, and the quality of life in the twentieth century.”¹¹⁶

”The virtue of forgiveness is espoused because it enables citizenry to free themselves from the consequences of action that might otherwise lock them into sterile cycles of action perpetuates reaction and mechanical vengeance.”¹¹⁷ By reflecting upon what has happened and understanding how things got to this precise stage we are better equipped to combat future occurrences. Arendt would have us examine the Holocaust in a way that will aid us in the resolution of contemporary atrocity and minimize future occurrences. “By recourse of this underlying grid, we have been able to elucidate the basis for Arendt’s belief that human endeavor becomes meaningful to the degree that it is at once free, individuating, and facilitating of self-transcendence vis a vis something of long or everlasting duration. Convincingly, Arendt argues that political action is well capable of being such a mode of endeavor.”¹¹⁸

Arendt’s political forum is precisely action. Critics tend to focus on Arendt’s lack of detail in establishing this political forum she calls for but they ignore the emphasis Arendt places on action and its meaning. “[T]he single most important check on our beliefs and conduct is the presence of others who see things differently.”¹¹⁹ Once we have regathered what it is to act and implement action as central to our lives, we have actualized Arendt’s political forum. “Any broadly participatory political arrangement which makes the political fate of leading citizens a consequence of public opinion should

¹¹⁶ Bradshaw, p. 65

¹¹⁷ Gottsegen 59

¹¹⁸ Gottsegen 233

¹¹⁹ Hinchman intro xxi

suffice, so long as the ethos of the citizenry at large serves to insure attentiveness to politics and the prominence of the criteria of meritorious public service that are inherent in the *sensus communis*.”¹²⁰

If Arendt offers any in-depth prescription she would be committing the same error of philosophers prior to her and those of our modern world. Action is spontaneous and original and once it is taken up it can not be guided. Arendt deals with this “frailty” of action by emphasizing the need for forgiveness for places where humans dealt wrong in the past. Forgiveness is primary because it is the only effective measure to mend the past and move forward with promises to do better. Enough beings acting prevent others from implementing selfish governance and is far too plural to fall prey to conformity. Thus, we must forgive past transgression in order that we are able to act together to safeguard humankind in a modern world.

¹²⁰ Gottsegen 200

5. CONCLUSION

Upon researching this subject, I came across an essay written by John L. Stanley, entitled *Is Totalitarianism a New Phenomenon: Reflections on Hannah Arendt's Origins of Totalitarianism*. I found it particularly interesting because the central thesis to this piece goes squarely against what I have purported in this thesis. According to Stanley, “[A]rendt’s opinion that totalitarianism is a new form of government that differs from essentially from all previous tyrannies and despotisms is wrong.”¹²¹ This specifically goes against the claim that the “atrocities” that I have addressed are the results of a modern world. Instead, he believes them to be extensions of age old despotisms.

Without going into too much detail concerning Stanley’s essay, I believe it relevant that he uses the Zulu tribe as an example of a ‘pre-modern’ society that practiced the vile tactics of extermination characteristic of modern terrorism. What Stanley fails still to appreciate is the motive driving these as well as all other ‘pre-modern’ atrocities. Here, in modern times, killing is done for the sake of killing, there is no motive to further national interests, whether it be imperialistic or for the sake of conquering. Whereas before any form of extermination furthered a nationalistic motive, in contemporary times we see no real substantive objective. Dislike, hatred and even indifference can be by today’s standards legitimate motivations. In wars today, destroying the enemy is as

¹²¹ Stanley, John. *Is totalitarianism a new phenomenon*.8

thoughtless as “stepping on an ant.” Therefore, modern day atrocity has taken on a distinctly new brutality that has the ability unlike before to destroy the meaning of humanity.

Arendt offers a very different kind of politics, she is clearly not a social scientist and her writing is without the obvious structure found in most political writings. She is not concerned with creating any political model for humans to copy, as is true of many political theorists. In fact, she wants us to get away from the model; she wants us to act. She clearly rejects traditional philosophy but retains enough “traditional discourse...to make her arguments suspect to those with postmodern sympathies.”¹²² Her political theory/ philosophy, however, is one that is well integrated and worthy of deliberation. All Arendt asks of us “is to think what it is that we are doing.”¹²³ It is this type of analytical reading that, Arendt would hope, has the power to effect change, by reflecting upon what has happened and understanding why such things came to be.

In order to make sense of a world that could permit the Holocaust, Arendt has us examine what it is about *the modern world* that has made such atrocity possible. It is for this reason, Arendt’s placement of modernity as the catalyst for such atrocity, that I rely heavily in this essay on Arendt’s *Human Condition* (although I do make use of her previous and subsequent works on totalitarianism). Other works of Arendt, such as *On Totalitarianism* and *Eichmann in Jerusalem* deal more specifically with the Holocaust, applying her familiar political format; however these are basic forms of what is found in *The Human Condition*. It is in *The Human Condition* that we get the most

¹²² Hinchman intro xxiii

¹²³ Arendt HC

comprehensive exhibition of Arendt's political theory; "none of these other works contains a systematic reflection on the relationship of thought to action."¹²⁴

I stated in the beginning that Arendt's political thought is unusual. Not everyone tends to believe that how we are identified by our audience is fundamental to our existence. That can be attributed to Arendt's phenomenology. Platonists, among many others, for example often take the position that human action is in its most significant way, internal. It is my hope that this will serve as a key to a door that has hardly been opened. "Relying on intellectual life, all the while criticizing the metaphysical tradition that grants privileged status to the contemplative life to the detriment of active life, Arendt sets out to assign greater value, to valorize, the active life, arguing that activity means life."¹²⁵

We need actors to emerge from the spectators as well as from amongst the victims. The rest of the world needs to do more than simply provide an audience and idly stand by as spectators; an audience is not enough. Others need to recognize wrongdoing and speak out on behalf of other beings. We have a responsibility as human beings to protect the thing that makes us human. Arendt believes, and I agree, that coupled with the ability to act is the responsibility. This is because it secures and protects that ability; it is really the case here that if we fail to exercise the ability to act we will lose it to ideology, conformism, a modern world of consumption and atrocity.

¹²⁴ Bradshaw, Leah. *Acting and Thinking: The Political Thought of Hannah Arendt*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1989., intro. P.6

¹²⁵ Kristeva 7

The international response to such context is always too slow and not strong enough. Why do humans choose for too long not to act and then fail to remain in the political forum once atrocity becomes conspicuous? In opposition to this, Arendt offers a life that is specifically human: the expression designates the moment between birth and death, as long as it can be represented by a narrative and shared with other men.”¹²⁶ If we wish to remain superior to the fox and the chicken and the rabbit, we must preserve the thing it is that makes us human. I desire to act because I wish to live among other human beings. “The chief characteristic of this specifically human life, whose appearance and disappearance constitute worldly events, is that it is itself always full of events which can be told as a story, establish a biography; it is this life, bios as distinguished from mere zoe, that Aristotle said is somehow a kind of praxis.”¹²⁷

¹²⁶ Kristeva 7,8

¹²⁷ Arendt, HC 97

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CURRICULUM VITAE

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