

MORE THAN A STAGE: THE WORLD IN HANNAH ARENDT'S PHILOSOPHY OF ACTION

The Human Condition

Human being is worldly being. It is the world that conditions all human activities. This is true for free political action as much as it is for work and labour. In this paper, I consider the relationship between action and the durable world as this points toward a possible and problematic dependency of action on the activity of work. I conclude with Arendt's appeal to the spectator to mediate this relationship. I ask whether the role of the spectator could ever be or have been enough to maintain the proper balance between the activities in and purposes of the durable world. I begin with a brief outline of Arendt's distinctions of human existence.

The *vita activa*

1. It's conditions and activities

Arendt begins with the distinction between the *vita activa* and the *vita contemplativa*. In the *vita activa* she isolates three activities: namely, action; work; and labour. Each activity corresponds to a particular human condition. Labour is rooted in the condition of life. Man as *animal laborans* responds to biological necessity and natural life cycles.¹ Work, as the fabrication of an artificial environment, corresponds to the condition of worldliness. As *homo faber*, man builds a durable world to outlast the individual lives within it. Action, the only activity that occurs between people, reflects the condition of plurality. Plurality is the being-together of equal yet unique human beings. This equality (*isonomiy*)² is provided by the fact that we can step out of the realm of individual inequality² and into a realm where no one rules or is ruled. All are peers.³ Arendt qualifies this notion of equality even further, describing it as resting in our being able to speak to and understand one another.

It is action alone, constituted by spoken words and deeds, which qualify as political.⁴ Politics occurs only in public where each person appears and relates to others. Work and labour, on the other hand, occur in the hidden, isolated spaces of the private realm, behind the walls of the home and workshop.

It is this publicness of action that denotes its worldliness and thus relationship to work. According to Arendt, the term "public" embraces two "interrelated" yet distinct phenomena.⁵ The first is the public space of appearance. This "space" is formed by the web of human relationships that relates and binds people together.⁶ It is a shared, *intangible* world of mutual presence in sight and sound. The second space signified is "the world itself" and "is related...to the human artifact, the fabrication of human hands, as well as to [the] affairs" of those "who inhabit the man-made world together."⁷ It is the *tangible* "in-between" which we have in common and assures each person of the reality outside subjective experiences.⁸

The publicness of action also corresponds to its meaningfulness, which rests in performance or the act itself. This performance discloses the unique identity of the actor. It is only in performance that *who* as opposed to *what* the actor is can be actualized.⁹ It is therefore also not what is done that is valued, but the person who does.¹⁰ Arendt is here

appealing to the notion of excellence or virtuosity (in Greek *aretē*, in Roman *virtus*), as the standard by which one can distinguish oneself.¹¹

Arendt's concept of action is also directly linked to her understanding of freedom. Freedom, according to Arendt, is the ability to initiate new beginnings.¹² This is rooted in the simple fact of our birth. Each birth, and thus each person, is a beginning. Since it is only in public that each person is actualized as an authentically new and unique individual, stepping out of the private and into the public world is itself an exercise of freedom.¹³

The revelation of self is specifically and only a revelation *to others*.¹⁴ It is only by being with others that action can be revelatory at all.¹⁵ Hence the importance of appearance. Arendt also makes clear that appearance to others necessitates both forms of public space. The world we build and share is central to our ability to appear in our plurality, that is, as free and unique persons. For example, Arendt claims that:

Without being talked about by men and without housing them, the world would not be a human artifice but a heap of unrelated things...without the human artifice to house them, human affairs would be as floating, as futile and vain, as the wanderings of nomad tribes.¹⁶

In other words, we need a shared world to be the content of our actions and to outlast our deeds, otherwise these become self-centered and meaningless. And it is also only in doing so that the world itself has meaning.¹⁷ Again, it is the publicness of action that requires that the world, its shape and formation, is a central concern of human affairs.

III. Care for the world

1. Acting on principle

It is *amor mundi*, love for the world, which compels one to enter the public.¹⁸ The public realm reflects the desire to rise above mortality and temporality and to add to the human artifice. This is clear from Arendt's article, "What is Freedom?" where she explicitly states that action is often based on principles.¹⁹ These principles come to us "from without," and are actualized in our words and deeds. A principle 'transcends' both goals and motives since these apply only to a particular actor or act.²⁰

The world is the *sine qua non* of principles since it is out of a concern for how the world is formed and what appears in it that any other principles are even considered.²¹ If, for example, I act from a principle of honour, I do so because I want honour to be part of the makeup of the world, I want it to appear consistently or even permanently in the world.²² In an article by James Knauer, he states that a display of principle, or "showing what one stands for...reveals who one is." In other words, understanding *who* someone is specifically entails knowing his or her relation to the world.

It is this relation between actor and world that is the source of action's dependency on work. Action and world influence and shape one another. But a tangible world requires tangible efforts of care. And, because the physical world affects the conditions that make free action possible, as I will now show, principles and acts of freedom must themselves be objectified.

2. Worldliness as conditioning force

In constructing a world, the possibilities for free action are delimited. For example, free action is conditioned by our plurality and natality, that is, our being unique and being born. Yet these conditions are themselves influenced by the world. Freedom, as a new beginning, can only be recognized as such in an already established world. The old must juxtapose the new. Furthermore, since the world is made by mortal hands and thus is not eternal, its preservation requires new possibilities and new generations.²³ Although freedom and world is each necessary for the preservation of the other, each also needs protection from the other. The newborn child, for example, although needing a world to be born into and step into, must first be sheltered against the publicness of the world. This, Arendt argues, is the purpose of education.

No child can be expected to step into the public light, to make his or herself known, without first coming to terms with the world and taking a stand in relation to it. Consider school dress codes. It is primarily at school where children engage with one another and come to know one another. The manner of their interaction is conditioned by what the environment emphasizes. Thus, in school systems with a dress code, knowledge develops strictly out of modes of interaction such as conversation or play. Without a shared dress code, though, identities come wrought with worldly positions, reflecting economic and social differences. This worldly position, or *what* one is, may then take primacy over *who* one is, or is becoming.

In other words, the physical and social structures in which we live affect what aspects of the human condition we recognize, develop, or stultify. We may be plural beings capable of free action, but through our world we may accentuate other features of human existence such as social standing or our biological needs. Understanding the public realm as an intangible space but also as the durable, man-made world that conditions human being, allows a community to build a world in actualization of its values.

Two problems now arise though. First, if the objective world is so significant in human affairs, then the principle or free act may become secondary to the object which testifies to that act. Second, Arendt is clear in her distinction between action and work. The making of a world, its institutions and structures, is the result of work, not action. For the world to gather people together in plurality, for freedom and action, work must be inspired by the principles of action. Is this possible?

Action and work

1. Mediating spectators: judges for the world

Arendt defines action and work strictly against one another. As previously mentioned, the foremost distinction is that action occurs in public, work in private. *Homo faber* cannot work in the public realm, while action can only *be* by being a public activity. Work is also dictated by the desired end product. It is the idea, the blueprint, which guides the entire fabrication process and justifies the means used. It is also the product alone that finally appears in public. Action, however, cannot be guided by a given standard. It is in its spontaneity and boundlessness that action remains an exercise of freedom. It is not the motivation or achievement, but the performance that counts. It is inter-action and

reaction. It is also for these reasons that the mentalities of homo faber and the men of action are in necessary tension with one another.²⁴

What mediates between these is what Arendt terms the “*cultura animi*,” that is, an attitude or mind that admires and preserves the world of appearances and “whose criterion is beauty.”²⁵ It is this activity of judgment, based on taste alone, that decides how the world should look and sound.²⁶ And it is the spectators, free of personal motives and desires that can judge *for* the world.²⁷

In so far as a judgment is for the world, objects can be endowed with a degree of permanence. In fact, the durability of an object is dependent upon a judgment of beauty. In a passage from “The Crisis in Culture,” Arendt asserts that:

...beauty is the very manifestation of imperishability. The fleeting greatness of word and deed can endure in the world to the extent that beauty is bestowed upon it.²⁸

Beauty in this case is not some transcendental, Platonic standard that governs human judgment. And its permanence is also not simply a permanence granted by the durability of material. Rather, both are determined through the sharing of human perspectives, in each community and subsequent generation.

A judgment of beauty, or, in terms of action, a judgment of greatness and excellence, recognizes that which ‘transcends’ the particular, be it the specific goals of an act or the utility of an object. Spectators are concerned only with appearance. Or, as Arendt states in reference to Cicero’s account of the *maxime ingenuum*, those who would “look for the sake of seeing only.”²⁹

And yet, the activity of judgment is itself a political activity since it requires the presence and perspectives of others. Only others can validate one’s judgments. In other words, it also depends on our being and interacting with others as peers, that is, on the condition of plurality. The activity of judgment is also an exercise of freedom. It is an activity of persuasion that is beyond the coercion of absolutes. The spectator therefore maintains an interest in freedom *and* in the preservation and objectification of judgments. To conclude, the spectator can mediate between work and action because both action and the products of work can be judged by appearance and for the world.

A few questions now arise though: Is the durability granted by judgments of beauty the same durability that Arendt speaks of as the durable worldly artifice? If so, is the world then “made” by acts of judgment rather than actual fabrication? Is fabrication merely a step in the process of world-creation?³⁰ The order of activities in the process of world-building remains problematic. Consider the founding of a new community. It is through this process that the question of how the world should look is first approached and where the tension between action and work unfolds.

2. World-building

According to Arendt, in the pre-Socratic, Greek community, before politics took the form of work, the experience of “sharing words and deeds” initiated and guided the making of the frameworks to surround it.³¹ In other words, fabrication was inspired by the possibilities for of action. However, Arendt also notes that, “*Before men began to act, a*

definite space had to be secured and a structure built where all subsequent action could take place” (emphasis added).³²

Thus it is homo faber that delimits the space for and participation in answering the questions of how we shall live together. This is problematic since homo faber relates to the public world as a space strictly for objects and standards, not for plurality and free interaction.

This does not appear to be problematic for Arendt. Homo faber, she argues, works within the same world (although in private) that relates people together.³³ Although only his objects are what finally appear in public, he is always indirectly engaged with those previous others who also made the world. In other words, homo faber is in touch with the judgments, standards, and principles of the past. These constitute his world, affect his work, and maintain him within the web of human relationships. Any further threat to the possibilities of action and freedom is mitigated by the role of the spectators.

But the impact of homo faber on the public space of appearance remains complex. It is here that the possibilities of action and the abilities of the spectators remain in question. First, the products of fabrication reflect a desire for objects, not people. Spectators thus find themselves confronted with a world of various objects, rather than an objective world gathering together people. Instead of judging actions, actors, and principles, spectators judge products. This is consistent with Arendt’s claim that the space of appearance that arises out of homo faber’s desire for products is one of exchange rather than relatedness.³⁴ Entering the public realm thus means doing so for the purposes of exchange, and as producers and traders, or buyers and sellers, not as persons. Any revelation of self is restricted to the private realm.

In *The Fall of Public Man*, Richard Sennett shows how the transformation of trade and consumption in the late 19th century impacted the public realm even further.³⁵ The rise of the department store, with fixed prices and large volumes, created the passive observer and buyer. Moreover, buyers were encouraged to invest personal meaning in objects. Thus, the public realm became one of personal and passive experience, rather than a political (interactional) and world-focused one.

The second problem is that homo faber does not only produce a durable world, but also produces a world that will “ease the pain and trouble of laboring.”³⁶ Although I have not discussed the place of labour within the process of making a world, as the activity that sustains life and as the source of freedom, labour is also an important factor. Homo faber actually mediates between action and labour, building a world for both. But a world built for laborers cannot look the same as a world built for political actors. A world that ‘saves’ the animal laborans is a world of tools focused on freeing man from the constraints of the private realm.

Spectators may judge these objects on the basis of their beauty, but they remain objects built for private use and consumption. This does not negate the need for objects that free the laborer from the necessities of life. However, a focus on the survival of the species turns attention away even from the objects produced. The products of work and labour are fed back into the production process, replacing utility and durability with efficiency in production and consumption. Not only has the public space for appearance been destroyed, but that which could be worthy of enduring in that space, namely acts of greatness and objects of beauty, have perhaps as well.

V. Concluding thoughts

The mediation of the spectator fails to withstand the onslaught of the work -labour relation. As the tangible world adheres to the demands of life and consumption, these overwhelm the other spheres and activities of human being. Aside from transforming the public space of interaction into one of passive observation and exchange, the human conditions themselves are threatened. Arendt elaborates on the world alienation suffered by modern mass man, but it is also human plurality that is at stake. In an environment where identity is constituted by passive appearance and automatic existence, the stimulants for preserving truly unique individuals as possibilities of freedom come into question. Moreover, it is not only political actors, but also the spectators and the exercise of judgment that rest on our being uniquely distinct beings. And it is this, the failure of men and women to care for the world in such a way that it can gather them in their plurality that has removed freedom and judgment from human affairs.