

POLITICAL ACTION AND FEMINISM IN THE FOUNDATION OF A POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY WITH A FEMININE IDENTITY: HANNAH ARENDT AS A MODEL

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Abstract:

It seems that the discourse on political action necessitates considerable attention, given the lofty and humanistic dimensions it embodies in an era where action is imposed as an imperative for self-preservation, as a marker of human dignity, and as a solution to numerous humanitarian crises. The political reality of the mid-twentieth century witnessed a political crisis manifested in the phenomenon of totalitarianism and authoritarian regimes. In response to this crisis, Arendt resorted to political action to fulfil the political promise, conceiving of the human being as a political animal within a public sphere. This raises fundamental questions: What are the boundaries of politics and its nature? What is the role of political action in relation to public life? Moreover, how is such action realised within the framework of Arendtian politics?.

Keywords: crisis, totalitarianism, political action, political freedom, public sphere.

1. Introduction:

The concept of the German-born American philosopher Hannah Arendt marks a significant turning point in the history of Western thought and a radical shift in the relationship between philosophy and politics. Traditional philosophy did not accord with politics the significance that Arendt bestowed upon it. Arendt's political specificity lies in her giving consideration and importance to political action, elevating the realm of politics over philosophy. This is not to say that political discourse was absent in traditional thought; rather, it is necessary to acknowledge active life and to view the human being as a political animal.

Understanding human nature is not confined solely to the concept of reason, considering humans as rational animals in the Aristotelian sense, or merely to the faculty of speech. Instead, action is among the conceptual tools through which we comprehend the human being, an enigmatic creature that has intrigued philosophers and captured their attention. Action endows human life with meaning, shifting this meaning from biological necessity and survival to a distinguishing factor and a point of intersection between contemplative life and active life, theory and praxis. Arendt provided a new perspective on humanity, not from the standpoint of essence or substance but from that of action and labour; human existence is but a manifestation of this action.

Arendt distinguished between labour, work, and action. What is the significance of this distinction? Moreover, how does this triad relate to political activity and freedom, as well as to the public sphere?.

2. Labour, Work, and Action

Through her political writings, Hannah Arendt seeks to conceive of the human being in a manner fundamentally different and opposed to that embraced by previous philosophies. It can be said that she has crafted a new image of humanity that can be understood only through the relationship of this being with the world, with others, and with plurality. This relationship is continually renewed within active or practical life.

She criticises traditional philosophies for their view of the human as an isolated being, disconnected from others, and incapable of achieving consensus as an acting entity: "the two dominant philosophical definitions of man as animal rationale and Homo faber are guilty of this oversight" (Arendt, 2018, p. 112).

Arendt divides life into two parts:

Contemplative life: This refers to a mode of existence fully occupied with being and thought, aiming to reveal the divine self. This life does not extend beyond contemplation, which she characterises as negation, permanence, and stillness. In the Middle Ages, contemplation was associated with theology, whereas in the modern era, it became linked with science.

Practical and active life:

This refers to the practical life experienced in public spaces, involving engagement with others. It is a life that requires practice and action. Arendt defines it as the environment in which humans perform various activities: "There are two types of life: a practical life and a contemplative life; practical in work and contemplative in other times; active in public spaces, contemplative in the desert; active when necessary with neighbours and contemplative in the vision of the Creator" (Arendt, 2016, p. 17). Arendt's distinction between contemplative and practical active life closely corresponds to the Greek philosopher Aristotle's differentiation between rational contemplative life and practical life.

In her book *The Human Condition*, Arendt highlights three human activities encompassed by practical life, dedicating a chapter to each: labour (Travail), work (Oeuvre), and action (Action). These are fundamental activities practised by humans, through which she distinguishes between man as *animal labourans*, man as *Homo faber*, and man as a political animal. Each activity has its own conditions and characteristics that shape political life. Arendt places particular emphasis on action owing to its intimate connection with politics as an end and goal: "Action, which is most intimately linked to the human condition... as the true political activity... is undoubtedly the central proposition of political thought" (Arendt, n.d., p. 28). However, what does Arendt mean by labour,¹ work, and action?

3. Labour:

The realm of labour is life itself, aligned with the biological demands of the body, such as eating, drinking, and growth. This activity is carried out by the individual immersed in everyday existence. The purpose of labour is the preservation of the species and ensuring its continuity; it is subject to life and its necessities. Humans are inherently inclined to satisfy their instincts and desires, which distinguishes them as *animal laborans*. Labour is directed towards consumption; its products are ephemeral and deceptive. Owing to its individualistic nature, labour is oriented towards nature rather than towards other selves. It is noncommunicative, unrelated to craftsmanship, and does not create a lasting effect: "The mark of every labour is that it leaves nothing behind" (Hannah Arendt, 1983, p. 99).

4. Work:²

If labour pertains to all that is natural and biological, work relates to what is artificial. It is distinguished by durability and continuity because the products of work are intended for use rather than consumption. Work is associated with all that humanity has constructed and created, reflecting human ingenuity in expressing resistance to nature and liberation from its grip and control. Work is the activity that leaves behind a human touch and imprint, expressing artistic productions that endure beyond death and find a place and space in the world. Thus, work grants permanence to ephemeral and noncontinuous things.

Arendt critiques the modern era and its material crises, arguing that it transformed craftsmanship and manufacture into consumable products, thereby reducing work or crafts to mere labour. The essential characteristic of work and craftsmanship is the realisation of benefits for humans, whether in their relation to objects or to other human beings:

¹ Note on terminology: Nabil Fazio uses the translation of labour as "الشغل" and work as "العمل الفني" (artistic work) (Fazio et al., 2013, pp. 681–682). Ali Abboud al-Muhammdawi prefers the Arabic term "الكدح" for labour, which better conveys the meaning of work referred to here as it more closely implies "effort" or "toiling" for the self (Abboud al-Muhammdawi et al., 2013, pp. 18–19).

² Note on terminology: Zuhair al-Khuildi uses the translation of work as "الحرفة," rendered as Work in English and Oeuvre in French, and translates it as "work" (al-Khuildi, 2013, p. 336).

"This is precisely what has happened in modernity: the continual reduction of the value of ends to means for achieving more ends, which themselves become means..." This lies at the heart of modernity's sense of temporal collapse: the breakdown of the distinction between *for the sake of* and *in order to*" (Philippe Hans, 2018, p. 103).

5. Action:

Arendt assigns great significance to action because of its intrinsic relationship with politics. Action is what distinguishes humans as political animals and characterises the relationships between people. It reveals communicative relations among humans, which manifests in the act of speech, through which the *who* (the self) emerges within a network of human relations. Action presupposes plurality and coexistence: "Action is the only activity that requires plurality" (Anne Amiel, 2007, p. 7).

Plurality and multiplicity are conditions for human action. Arendt's intention in conceptualising political activity is to abstract human action from individualism and isolation. Action is not linked to material consumption or the products created by human hands. However, it is directly related to the human present in the world in relation to the other as a counterpart self. From this understanding, action is specific to humans, as it escapes the grip of physical and biological necessity. On this basis, political actions exclusively concern the political being, excluding the animal being, with the difference between them being the actual exercise of action and the latter's capacity for change: "Arendt's thought on action is not theoretical; it is always a choice (an experiment) of something as a different mode of thinking" (Hisham Mu'afah, 2020, p. 280).

This distinction that Arendt draws between labour, work, and action results from her division of life into two halves: a contemplative and static life and an active life. This division led her to direct a sharp critique of traditional philosophies, which she viewed as idealistic and contemplative, far removed from practice and application, with Platonic and Cartesian philosophy foremost among them. These philosophies have long focused on the life of the soul and thought at all levels. Unsurprisingly, Arendt revisited ancient and perennial questions such as those of freedom, history, and power to impart new meanings and alternative directions to those shaped by the contemplative horizon. She closely linked freedom with politics.

Thus, contemplative life and philosophy themselves were found to be distant from public life and common sense. Arendt confined herself to considering herself a thinker and political actor and rejected inclusion within the body of philosophical research or the claim to be a philosopher.

Her focus on active life over contemplative life stems from the fact that previous philosophies engaged in contemplation and philosophical thought to achieve human perfection and absolute truth, thereby neglecting the active and practical aspects of humanity, fixating instead on rational existence and essence. Our philosopher draws attention to the reconsideration of the existence of this being through a return to political life as activity and practice: "The human capacity for action is what makes him a political being, enabling him to relate to others of his kind, to act with them in concert, and to attain goals and projects that would never have entered his mind alone" (Hannah Arendt, 1992, p. 74).

Thus, Hannah Arendt was able to redefine the human not by essence or substance determined by birth but rather through the intersubjective relationships that connect him with other selves who share life and partake in common aspirations and future expectations, as beings

who live under a public sphere an arena and space where selves exercise their activities and achieve consensus: "Politics deals with the coexistence and gathering of different people, organising humans politically based on some fundamental commonality rooted in the absolute chaos of differences or derived from it" (Hannah Arendt, 2018, pp. 149–150).

A human cannot exist in this sphere except if it is free. What, then, is the relationship between politics, the public sphere, and freedom?

6. Politics and Freedom within the Public Sphere:

Hannah Arendt linked her concept of the human being to the human condition, represented by the interactive and active aspects of life, namely, political action. Thus, discourse on action inevitably leads to the subject of freedom, which is neither a subjective nor metaphysical problem but rather a political problem. Since ancient Greek philosophy, philosophers have explored freedom, refining its concept as will and choice. Arendt's approach to freedom is revealed in its relationship with politics and the realm of action. The need for coexistence and presence with others imposes freedom.

Philosophical freedom, in her view, does not apply to the political being integrated within political assemblies, subject to their laws as a free citizen with the capacity to act rightly and refrain from that, which ought to be avoided:

"Thus, political freedom is distinguished from philosophical freedom, clearly affirmed as a capacity to be rather than a will to be. As citizens, more than simply as human beings generally, it appears only in a society where a large number of people live together and observe their relationship in word and deed" (Hannah Arendt, 2017, p. 230).

From this distinction between philosophy and politics, it is concluded that Arendt excludes herself from the tradition of early philosophers, who defined and shaped the meaning of freedom within a theoretical framework, linking it to subjectivity, thought, and contemplation and considering it an end in itself rather than a means. In her view, this notion is associated with those isolated from politics.

The human being, as a political animal, exercises activities within the public sphere, the space in which human beings move from potentiality to action. This transition is from the family into which one is born and created towards the realm where the human condition is realised. This sphere, according to her, is created by humans and persists through continuity, in contrast to nature and the cosmos. She distinguishes between the activities carried out within this space, which she terms the public realm, and those of society. The achievement of human perfection occurs only when one moves from the family, regarded as the basic unit of society, to the public sphere, from managing household affairs and fulfilling its necessities to managing public affairs and shared interests. This distinction separates the private sphere from the public sphere. Furthermore, the latter is characterised by plurality and multiplicity, alongside a greater degree of freedom enjoyed by individuals than the family, where one is subject to biological necessity, coercion, and paternal authority:

"We can only penetrate the political sphere if we distance ourselves from our private existence and our familial surroundings connected to our lives, a space previously intruded upon by those who dared to step beyond the threshold of the household" (Hannah Arendt, 2014, p. 43).

Arendt designates the public sphere as the space of appearance, considering action, freedom, and the public sphere as the fundamentals and cornerstones of political life. She draws her concept of politics from Greek heritage, particularly from the philosopher Aristotle. Arendt suggested that the accomplishment of political action is realised through language, coexistence

with others, and the ability to share accomplishments. She derives from her teacher Martin Heidegger the concept of language as the dwelling of being, through which the self is revealed and thought and existence are expressed. She rejects the idea of language as a mere tool for communication and expression, since human actions cannot be understood without language. Consequently, the ability to appear in the public sphere as a manifestation and reflection of the presence of active selves is lost without language. Language, hence, becomes an essential condition and pillar of political life, as it allows the "who" to appear and be revealed to others (Nabil Fazio, n.d., pp. 108–109).

Since joining the public sphere requires language and speech, the success and quality of consensus depend on individuals themselves, plurality, and solidarity to ensure the equal and fair common interests of citizens. Those who lack awareness of the importance of the common good and shared responsibility among themselves in the public sphere fall outside this solidarity, which explains their resort to violence. Arendt legitimises their use of violence as a means of change and self-defense, although violence can sometimes escalate into something worse.

Freedom as a condition for political action was violated by totalitarian and authoritarian regimes, as expressed by Arendt in her seminal work *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, a product of modern times. One of the motivations for Arendt to address such regimes was her personal experience and that of the German–Jewish intellectual elite under Nazi rule in Germany, many of whom were exiled or imprisoned. The Holocaust stands as a historical testament to the tyranny nature of these regimes, alongside fascism in Italy.

The adverse outcomes and breaches of humanity's grand ideals promised by modernity and its deviation from its initial path aimed at uplifting all humanity led many philosophers, including Arendt, to critique modernity and the Enlightenment of rationality, which the Frankfurt School theorists termed instrumental rationality.

Among the considerations that inspired Arendt's thought were the concept of the totalitarian wave and the dominance of dictatorial and repressive regimes during the twentieth century:

"The totalitarian attempt to render people useless largely reflects what contemporary masses do in their futility on an overcrowded earth. Hence, the world of death, where people are taught they are useless through a mode of life... This world is the factory that produces absurdity daily" (Hannah Arendt, n.d., p. 237).

Totalitarian regimes sought to destroy political action and the human condition by suppressing freedom. *Eichmann in Jerusalem* is one of Arendt's most important works, where she articulated the banality of evil, showing how totalitarian regimes normalised the commission of crimes and banalised evil against humanity.

Arendt revealed in her reflections on the trial that she preferred active life to contemplative life to reclaim and exercise freedom as action. Her stance on this trial sparked widespread anger, which she explained as arising from her unintentional excavation of a past best left hidden: "I decided that the reason might be that I unintentionally dug up a past better left forgotten" (Hannah Arendt, n.d., p. 21).

Conclusion:

In conclusion, Hannah Arendt's emphasis on action and an active life led her to prioritise the latter over contemplative life and practice over theory. She linked politics with freedom as an activity rather than a voluntary or optional state, which explains her rejection of traditional philosophy and her steadfast commitment to active life. Arendt believed firmly in the role of the citizen and their capacity for action, participation, and interaction within the political sphere,

viewed as a public space in contrast to the private familial sphere. Consequently, she rejected totalitarian regimes and the totalitarian wave that resulted in the destruction of societies and the suppression of freedoms. For this reason, she distinguished between philosophical freedom and political freedom, linking the latter to plurality, speech, and language as a means of expressing existence rather than merely as tools for communication and dialogue.

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