

Labour and work

TWO

Labour, work and action

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Labour, work and action are the three elements that constitute Hannah Arendt's *vita activa*. Together, and in combination, they represent Arendt's account of what it means to be human. The *vita activa* is a radical and profound challenge to two traditions in political thought.¹ The first tradition Arendt opposes is one that privileges contemplation and theoretical knowledge, the *vita contemplativa*, over action. She traces this view to ancient Greek political thought, which is continued in Christian ideas about the proper ends of human life. In essence, this tradition disengages from the world and demotes and diminishes the value of political action. The *vita activa* recovers an alternative tradition that values action and worldliness. Second, Arendt opposes a modernist tradition that, while it rejects the *vita contemplativa*, values labour and work over political action. In other words, Arendt not only defends the *vita activa*, she also defends a particular hierarchical ordering of its elements – privileging political action over work and labour.

Arendt's great contribution to contemporary political thought is her conceptualization of political action as a distinct category of philosophical enquiry. While a great deal of attention has been given to Arendt's notion of action, it is important to see how it fits together with the other elements of the *vita activa*. I will therefore discuss labour, work and action in order and end with a brief survey of some major criticisms.

Labour lies at the bottom of Arendt's hierarchical *vita activa*. Labouring is an animal activity required to sustain life, involving eating, digestion and general physical care. Any activity that is aimed towards maintaining or reproducing life is labour on Arendt's account. Thus, planting seeds, showering, grocery shopping, dish-washing, childcare and so on, are labour. They are activities we share in common with the rest of the animal kingdom. In addition, industrial activities that aim at helping us to live and reproduce are also labour. Large-scale farming, food trucking, and resource extraction for heating homes for example, count equally as labour. As animals we are subject to biological necessity and the natural processes of an earthbound biological life. This constraint on human life takes the form of *necessity* that binds us to a capricious natural realm and from which we only escape at death. It is important to notice from the outset that Arendt directly opposes necessity to freedom. In so far as we are only embodied creatures tethered to our biological needs we cannot be free. The possibility of freedom requires that we transcend our natural, biological selves. Indeed, Arendt adopts the ancient view that "the labor of our body which is necessitated by its needs is slavish" (Arendt 1958: 83). This is a rather blunt denigration of a class of activities that occupy a good portion of our daily lives.

Lying at the root of Arendt's concern is the futile character of these activities. They are repetitive and ceaseless and can be understood on a circular conception of time (*ibid.*: 97–8). Once we have eaten we are required to seek out more food so that we can eat again, and so on, ceaselessly until the cycle is stopped by death. Looked at from this perspective, we share the circularity of time with the rest of biological nature. There is nothing at the level of labour, understood in this way, that distinguishes me from you except, perhaps, the details of how we confront and, for a while at least, defeat necessity. There is nothing that distinguishes me from an ant or a tulip either in so far as we all seek subsistence in our own peculiar ways. Arendt argues that our individuality as *human* beings is lost in the grand scheme of life and our distinction as *particular* human beings with purposes and projects is equally lost from view. The endless cycle of life and death confronts us with our inevitable decay and our mortality.

Arendt focuses on the fact that the products of our labour are used up in consumption and thus our labours leave nothing permanent behind – labour "never 'produces' anything but life" (*ibid.*: 88). As we will see shortly, this lack of permanence signals the absence of a human world to inhabit. It should be clear from these brief remarks that Arendt

reserves a special meaning for the word “human” in this context. In the first place, human lives require a world to inhabit that is, in a sense yet to be explained, objective and more or less permanent. Labouring and consuming, the twin activities of animal life, cancel each other out and leave no properly human mark. Second, labouring for the purpose of maintaining and reproducing life is an act done in isolation, according to Arendt. Digestion is a solitary act in the same way that pain is a solitary experience – we cannot digest each other’s food any more than we can feel the pain of others. Arendt remarks:

The only activity that corresponds to the experience of worldlessness, or to the loss of the world that occurs in pain, is laboring, where the human body, its activity notwithstanding, is also thrown back on itself, concentrates on nothing but its own being alive, and remains imprisoned in its metabolism with nature without ever transcending or freeing itself from the recurring cycle of its own functioning. *(Ibid.: 115)*

The isolated and solitary character of labour marks it not only as animal rather than human but also as pre-political. This is because Arendt insists that a fully human life is one lived among other people in a community. A human life, well-lived, is conducted among a plurality of people and not in isolation.

Before moving on to Arendt’s account of work we should note that while she wants to sharply distinguish labour from the positive attributes she attaches to work and, most directly, to action, she does acknowledge the “blessings” and “pleasure” that accompany “the functioning of a healthy body” (*ibid.*: 105–6). While labouring can be a grim Schopenhauerian struggle for existence, the pleasures of the body offer some compensation. However, Arendt does not want us to conflate the idea of pleasure with the essential constituents of a good human life. Indeed, she correlates the desire for “happiness” with living in a society that values labour: “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” (*ibid.*: 134). Finally, we should not mistake Arendt’s views as a utopian desire to rid people of the need for labour. She is clear that our mortal, embodied, nature makes labour a permanent feature of the human condition. She accuses Marx of utopian thinking in believing that the necessity of labour can be banished from human life (*ibid.*: 87–93).

Arendt calls the political orientation that cherishes the values of labour over the other elements of the human condition “the social”.

She is particularly critical of the way in which social issues concerning welfare (satisfying the needs of the human body) intrude on, and corrupt, the political realm. She says that “The social viewpoint is identical ... with an interpretation that takes nothing into account but the life process of mankind, and within its frame of reference all things become objects of consumption” (*ibid.*: 89). We will return briefly to the issue of the social in Arendt’s thought when we review some of the criticisms that have been made against her notion of political action at the end of this essay.

In many ways it is unsurprising that a philosopher would focus on labour and its place in the political vocabulary of modern thought. As she points out in detail in *The Human Condition*, the classical modernists, such as Locke, Smith and Marx, set the notion of labour at the centre of their thought. Indeed, it is fair to say that the modernist view of “man” is of someone who labours. However, Arendt thinks this view fails to make a crucial distinction between labour as she describes it and a quite different activity, namely the activity of work. The difference is important because without the perspective of work we cannot see the reality of labour as a mode of being. She says:

This destructive, devouring aspect of the laboring activity, to be sure, is visible only from the standpoint of the world and in distinction from work, which does not prepare matter for incorporation but changes it into material in order to work upon it and use the finished product. *(Ibid.: 100)*

One of the important contributions Arendt makes to contemporary political thought is to point out and articulate the distinction between labour and work.

Arendt says that work makes a “world” in which humans can live. What workers make are objects that are durable and have a measure of permanence. She says that “Viewed as part of the world, the products of work – and not the products of labor – guarantee the permanence and durability without which a world would not be possible at all” (*ibid.*: 94). She has in mind mundane objects like a table or a building, as well as cultural artefacts like books and, indeed, abstract objects like poems and stories (as long as they are recorded). Unlike labour which is essentially non-productive in so far as its products are used up in consumption, work leaves behind something that extends beyond satisfying the biological needs of its maker. What work produces is an objective world that constitutes a shared human reality. She describes this as work constituting the very structure of human experience by

constructing a world that we then inhabit, and to which, in our own way, we contribute to through our own work. Arendt provides a helpful metaphor to understand the role of the world when she says that just as a table functions as an in-between, separating and at the same joining people together, so the world functions as an in-between, providing a common ground that joins us into a community but which also separates us into distinct individuals (*ibid.*: 182). It is in fact essential to the possibility of genuine political action that a world brings together the plurality of human beings. The presence of the other and the world both requires and helps establish an objective reality that is distinct from the subjective mind of the individual for whom the other and the world would otherwise be indistinguishable from mere subjective representations. This phenomenological insight is affirmed in Arendt's remark that "The whole factual world of human affairs depends for its reality and continued existence, first on the presence of others who have seen and heard and who remember, and, second, on the transformation of the intangible into the tangibility of things" (*ibid.*: 95).

Arendt's conception of the world also makes it the intermediary between nature and humanity. Work elevates us beyond the repetitious and mute cycle of nature and gathers us into a common reality and shared objective space. The world is therefore a non-natural space, one that is entirely humanized. One further feature of work's relationship to nature is Arendt's assertion that work, in transforming nature into artefacts, does violence to nature. Work is an inherently violent activity, breaking up nature through extraction of raw materials and then the transformation of nature into useful objects.

Not only are the products of work different from the products of labour in their being more or less permanent fixtures of a world, they also represent a quite different orientation towards time. We noted earlier that for Arendt, time for *animal laborans* is circular – eating so that one can eat again later. The cycle of nature, birth, reproduction and death is a fact for both us and all other animals. However, work introduces an alternative conception of time that is linear rather than circular. The artefact is meant to persist through time beyond the life of its maker and stand permanently in the world. In this way the maker of an object is rewarded with the possibility of a kind of immortality. Work offers the prize of stepping out of the biological limits of nature. Time as linear rather than circular is thus "human time" rather than "natural time".

Finally, and importantly, work is governed by a teleological view. Work is a strategic activity that sets itself an end and seeks the means to accomplish this end. Work is undertaken in order to achieve something

rather than for its own sake. *Homo faber*, the fabricator, is an instrumentalist for whom an activity must answer to the questions: What is it for? What purpose does it serve? Dana Villa has made the argument that although Arendt adopts many of the themes and philosophical attitudes of ancient Greek philosophy and of Aristotle in particular, she takes a critical view of Aristotle's universal teleology. While Arendt concurs with Aristotle as far as work is concerned, she rejects extending the teleological view to action. We will see soon that Arendt identifies freedom with action and in particular with what Villa calls action's "self-containment", its non-purposiveness.²

Arendt's account of the *vita activa* sits unsteadily between two sorts of claims. First, the elements of the *vita activa* appear to be part of an ontological claim about the essential and constitutive features of human life. Second, the *vita activa* appears to be a critique of modernist mores, attitudes and values. A reader might wonder how we can fail to be what we are. However, Arendt is not offering an account of human nature in the traditional sense. Instead she is identifying modes of being in the world that are available to human beings, what Seyla Benhabib (2003) has called Arendt's phenomenological existentialism. While each mode of being is necessary to human life, each mode has its proper and correct place. Arendt is critical when the order of the *vita activa* is disrupted and a lower mode of being comes to dominate society, cancelling out the virtues of the higher modes. She is particularly critical of the mode of existence typified by *animal laborans* and we will examine some of those criticisms here. We will also examine some of the vices of *Homo faber*.

Arendt recognizes Marx as the great theorist of labour and we have already mentioned Arendt's claim that Marx runs together labour and work and fails to distinguish between these separate kinds of activities. More pressing though than this academic point is Marx's elevation of labour as *the* singular human virtue. For the reasons Arendt spells out and we have rehearsed, labour is far from being a virtue; it is rather a necessity imposed on us by nature. It lacks the freedom and agency that a genuine virtue would possess. However, Marx is not alone in trumpeting the value of labour. The classical liberal tradition too promotes labour's virtues, albeit with different outcomes in mind. For Arendt, the consequence of this has been the creation of a society dedicated to consumption, the lowest, most animal-like human condition. We seek satisfaction and contentment which we call happiness. Moreover, the consumer attitude has begun to "eat away" at the world by transforming what were once durable and permanent objects into throw-away consumables. If no artefact is made to be permanent but rather made

to be obsolete, to be used and consumed, then the very structure of the world, as Arendt understands it, is threatened. She argues that:

The endlessness of the laboring process is guaranteed by the ever-recurrent needs of consumption; the endlessness of production can be assured only if its products lose their use character and become more and more objects of consumption, or if, to put it another way, the rate of use is so tremendously accelerated that the objective difference between use and consumption, between the relative durability of use objects and the swift coming and going of consumer goods, dwindles to insignificance.

(Arendt 1958: 125)

As Marx well understood, capitalism eventually commodifies all parts of human life and work, and on this point Arendt is in agreement. Furthermore, the elevation of labour to the head of the *vita activa* does more than distort the rank and order of our properly human capabilities, it also undermines the possibility of political action, as Arendt understands it. As we will see below, because the attitude of *animal laborans* is one fixed on fulfilling wants and satisfying desires, the political realm is hijacked to serve social needs rather than being a venue for real political action.

Arendt pays less attention to the distortions and dangers of elevating work to the head of the *vita activa*, although she is careful to note that these dangers are real. Dana Villa calls this phenomenon the “politics of instrumentality” which “generalize the fabrication experience” to the whole of life (Villa 1996: 23). Taking the means-end attitude that is central and proper to the domain of work, and generalizing it to cover the political domain, corrupts the latter by turning political questions into strategic calculations. Arendt writes: “The issue at stake is, of course, not instrumentality, the use of means to achieve an end, as such, but rather the generalization of the fabrication experience in which usefulness and utility are established as the ultimate standards for life and the world of men” (Arendt 1958: 157). A political act when conducted in the mode of work becomes a mere means to some further end but Arendt will argue that action, and political action in particular, is an end in itself. She sees the problematic influence of *Homo faber* throughout political as well as ethical discourse that looks to consequences and outcomes as the measure of political success.

One aspect of Arendt’s analysis of labour and work that deserves mention is her claim that a “meaningful” human existence cannot be achieved in lives dominated by the values of labour and work. Labour’s

cyclical character makes it forever an inward-looking life that cannot transcend the urgent demands of the self. Work is locked into a never-ending chain of means and ends and it is therefore chained to an instrumental view of life. On the instrumental view everything is a means and so transcendence here too is impossible. It is only in action that transcendence is possible and thus it is only in action that a meaningful life is possible.

Before we move away from labour and work and turn to Arendt’s entirely novel account of political action it is worth noting a significant critique of Arendt’s account of labour. Feminists have been both sceptical about the value Arendt puts on labour and puzzled by her failure to see the gendered character of her sharp division between labour and work. The roots of Arendt’s account of labour lie in Aristotle’s distinction between the public and the private, between *agora* and *oikos* – the public square and the household. It is in the household that reproductive labour is undertaken, including child rearing and what Marx calls the “reproduction of our labour power”, and this labour has traditionally been the work of women. The fact that women have been denied access to the public square and cloistered in the home, responsible for the labour that meets our biological needs, is not something that Arendt overtly addresses. Furthermore, feminists have argued that what Arendt calls “unproductive” labour should be reassessed and affirmed as properly belonging at the centre of human values and virtues. Of course, Arendt doesn’t think that labour *should* be woman’s work and much of the labour she references has to do with labour that is traditionally done by men. Moreover, some feminists while remaining sceptical perhaps of some of the language Arendt uses to describe labour have found her work very useful in furthering feminist concerns (see Honig 1995).

Action

What Arendt means by action is not easy to sum up in a few sentences. It is a complex concept that draws together a number of ideas into a largely coherent but nonetheless challenging notion. The difficulty is partly explained by the revolutionary nature of Arendt’s undertaking in overturning several truisms in political philosophy. We noted in the introduction that Arendt thinks “against the tradition” in political thought. Bhikhu Parekh goes further and says: “It is hardly an exaggeration to say that she is the only philosopher in the history of political thought to undertake extensive investigations into and offer a perceptive analysis of the nature and structure of political action” (B. Parekh

1981: 125). It is not surprising then that her account of action needs an extensive elaboration.

We can return to the idea that Arendt challenges two traditions in political thought. The first was mentioned in the introduction where we noted that Arendt challenges the view that the contemplative attitude is the pinnacle of human achievement – a view that is dominant in both ancient Greek and Christian thought. In opposition to this Arendt privileges the practical over the theoretical in the realm of the political. The second tradition is a more recent one that, like Arendt, is keen to give a place to the practical but which Arendt finds severely wanting. Kant best represents this modernist tradition in that he privileges practical reasoning as an essential feature of human life. Yet, in Arendt's view, Kant retains some of the worst aspects of the pre-modern Christian/Greek tradition. First, Kant, in his ethical writing, which is dedicated to articulating a philosophy of practical life, retains the notion that practical thinking is essentially a solitary affair – conducted between an individual and the dictates of universal reason. Second, Kant locates the source of authority for practical wisdom outside the human world in the noumenal realm. Arendt objects to both of these characterizations of the practical life – to the idea that practical thinking is solitary and that practical authority resides outside the human world. As she says at the beginning of *The Human Condition*, it is crucial to realize the “fact that men, not Man, live on the earth and inhabit the world” (Arendt 1958: 7). Kant therefore imports into his account of practical reason elements of the *vita contemplativa* by failing to acknowledge the plurality of human beings and by failing to locate within the human sphere the source of practical authority and meaning. Arendt's articulation of the notion of action is meant to be a remedy to these major faults in the tradition of political thought.

Action is something undertaken by a person. This seemingly obvious fact hides an important distinction that motivates much of what Arendt has to say about action. She distinguishes between *who* a person is and *what* they are. What we are is a member of a particular species, physically, biologically and chemically much the same as other members. However, who we are picks out the ways in which we are different from others. So, for Arendt, each individual person is “unique, unexchangeable, and unrepeatable” (*ibid.*: 97) and each has a narrative that distinguishes her from the manifold of humanity – “men distinguish themselves instead of being merely distinct” (*ibid.*: 176). Actions are the deliberate deeds of particular humans that individualize them, lifting them from being merely instances of a natural species to being persons who have a recognizable identity. She says that “In acting and

speaking, men show who they are, reveal actively their unique personal identities and thus make their appearance in the human world” (*ibid.*: 179).

The distinctiveness of the individual cannot be revealed, however, without a context. In the first place, an action must be witnessed because an action is self-disclosure. It reveals *who* a person is by what they do and say. This notion of revelation and disclosure logically requires a spectator and so there are no strictly private actions. Thus, actions must be public and so there must also be a space for them to occur and to be witnessed. On this point Arendt ([1951] 2004) notes that one of the principal features of a totalitarian regime is its denial of the public space needed for genuinely political actions. Second, a person's action is part of a distinctive narrative that describes the *who* of a person's life. A narrative of this sort attempts to capture the meaning of an action and, while the actor is closest to the deed, it is the audience who best understands the meaning of what has been done: “*Who* somebody is or was we can only know by knowing the story of which he himself is the hero – his biography, in other words; everything else we know of him, including the work he may have produced and left behind, tells us only *what* he was” (*ibid.*: 186). The narrative of a person's life is not finalized until their life has been completed, and even then there are some exceptional lives whose full meaning is still debated.

Action therefore has a role in individuating and disclosing persons but how does one act? What form does action take? Arendt most often associates action with speech. Some commentators wonder whether action and speech are the same thing for Arendt but the texts are ambiguous on this point. Whatever interpretation is favoured, it is clear that speech is very closely associated with action. Speech has a number of features that make it suited to action. First, it reveals the mind and character of the speaker in the clearest way. Second, speech communicates directly with an audience thus immediately connecting actor and spectator. Third, speech articulates while also challenging the meaning of the life shared by a community. Fourth, speech is connected to reason and judgement thus humanizing action and offering a different picture of human motivation and behaviour than the Hobbesian account that rests on an animal-like motivation, consisting of aversion and attraction. Lastly, speech is recordable and suited to the idea of a person's life as narrative.

Arendt regards a citizen's disclosure of herself as a performance. Her words and deeds are given up for the judgement of others within what she calls the “space of appearance”. There is therefore a sense of theatricality in the idea of an action. The individual performs her

act as a hero in the narrative that constitutes the script of her life. Her stage is the public square and her audience is her fellow citizens. In a very Greek sense, Arendt regards citizens as seekers of glory and fame. At best, their deeds are heroic and they are seen as heroes in the eyes of their communities.

This brings us back to the idea of immortality we first encountered in regard to work. Like work, action offers the possibility of immortality. Actions take place on a linear conception of time rather than the circular conception of labour time. This is because, like an object or artefact, political actions can endure beyond the lives of their authors. They endure because of their consequences or because they are remembered in history through writings, poetry and art. However, unlike objects, actions are “fragile”. They disappear in the moment of their execution unless they are recorded in some way to preserve them and secure the immortality of their authors.

It is natural to ask what makes an action worthy of being remembered. Arendt says that what is special about action is that it inserts something original and unanticipated into the world. The dull regularity of the natural world is disrupted by action and so what is distinctive about human beings is that they are capable of “starting something new”. She calls this phenomenon natality, the giving birth to the new. The unexpected in history, novelty in human affairs and culture are the result, says Arendt, of the capability we have to originate a chain of events through our actions. This is a crucial aspect of the idea of action because it assigns authorship to a deed as well as responsibility for the consequences of an action.

Responsibility is a topic crucial to understanding Arendt’s discussion of action. She says that actions are “boundless” (Arendt [1951] 2004: 190). By this she means that their consequences are “inherently” unpredictable and beyond the control of an action’s author. In this way, an action is never completed, rather it is initiated and thrown into the world much as a stone is thrown into a pond. This occasions a significant dilemma on the part of the actor for not only are the outcomes of actions unpredictable, once initiated an action and its consequences are irreversible. An actor is therefore responsible for both the action she is about to undertake and for the actions she has already initiated. She cannot change the past, of course, and she has only limited control over the future. Actions are therefore “risks” that individuals take but which the community must mitigate if it is to permit the full expression of humanity. Despite our utopian wishes, there is no “remedy for the frailty of human affairs” (*ibid.*: 195). Arendt addresses the existential dilemma of responsibility for action

by introducing norms of promising and forgiveness. Promises mitigate the unpredictable nature of actions and forgiveness mitigates their irreversible nature. As Parekh expresses Arendt’s thought – “promise stabilizes the future, forgiveness suspends the past” (B. Parekh 1981: 117). Responsibility for actions remains with the actor but the risk of acting is, in a way, shared through the community in episodes of promising, acting and forgiving.

In summary, an action can be described as a moment of origination that discloses the individual actor within a plurality of others who constitute an audience and who are bound to the actor by a common world. These characteristics of action lead to the centre of Arendt’s discussion of action, which is the idea of freedom. Human freedom is exemplified and perhaps constituted by actions. To be free is to act in Arendt’s very specific understanding of action. Moreover, to act is to be human in the highest sense of the *vita activa*. For Arendt, the purpose of life is not to lead a “good life” in the Aristotelian sense but to be free in a sense much closer to the existentialist view of freedom. The opposite of freedom is necessity, and action, on Arendt’s view, escapes both the necessitations of labour as well as the necessitations of means-end thinking that constitutes the instrumentality of work. Freedom through action thus promises the possibility of transcending the limitations of our embodied selves and the mechanical thinking of instrumentality. Freedom through action brings meaning to human lives.

There is one further aspect of action and particularly of speech that is crucial to the idea of action, and one that has been deeply influential in contemporary political thought. This is the deliberative nature of political life, an idea that Arendt pioneered and which has been taken up in the deliberative democracy movement. Arendt argues that unconstrained deliberation aimed at argument, persuasion and negotiation is the essence of political life. It is in speech with others that we acquire what Kant calls an “enlarged mentality” and thereby escape our solitude and subjectivity. Here, once again, we see Arendt insist that genuine political action is conducted among “men” in their plurality and their differences. What Arendt calls “power”, in opposition to “violence”, is exercised through a political community, between citizens, in deliberation with one another:

Power is actualized only where word and deed have not parted company, where words are not empty and deeds are not brutal, where words are not used to veil intentions but to disclose realities, and deeds are not used to violate and destroy but to establish relations and create new realities. (Arendt 1958: 200)

This is an articulation of a form of “communicative power”, as opposed to “strategic power”, that Habermas (1977) finds original and compelling in Arendt’s work. For Arendt, politics is not a pale version of an ideal, transcendental ethics or a theoretical practice best conducted by Philosopher Kings. Instead it is a messy dialogue that takes place between citizens. Of course there are constraints on deliberation that constitute the legitimacy of the power exercised by citizens collectively, the main constraint being that political debate is free of coercion in all its forms.

To deliberate with others as citizens is to act through speech. However, speech requires a shared point of reference for citizens’ deliberations. This common world is, as we have seen, made through work. It forms the structure, objects, cultural artefacts and institutions that serve as a shared background that enables citizens’ actions and speech to gain purchase with one another. A shared world serves the function of a “*sensus communis*” that enables a plurality of people to arrive at an objective judgement in the absence of universal truths (Arendt 1992). Our “common sense” shaped by our shared world enables the possibility of political agreement, even if this agreement is by its nature temporary and subject to revision.

While Arendt is a champion of democracy, she is deeply suspicious of modern representative democracy (see Arendt 1963; Kateb 1984). Her account of action values individual agency and so the form of democracy that most fits with this radical form of individualism is a Greek-style participatory democracy. She thinks of representative democracy as a handing off of a citizen’s opportunities for action, for their own humanity, onto an elaborate form of bureaucracy. If action signals the pinnacle of individual human agency then this cannot be represented by another person. Another can act for you but *your* action cannot be theirs.

Modern democratic states administer and bureaucratize and so turn citizens into subjects, in Arendt’s opinion. The kinds of democratic participation that she favours as examples of genuine political action are historically rare. Aside from the ancient Greek *polis*, Arendt mentions revolutionary America and fleeting moments of participatory democracy in past revolutions such as the 1871 Paris Commune and the 1956 Hungarian revolution. Perhaps the New England town meeting is a vestigial form of participatory democracy in the modern world. It is easy to be sceptical of Arendt’s romantic Rousseau-like attachment to face-to-face democracy. It is hard to know how to institutionalize a political apparatus that would accommodate the demanding requirements of political action, as Arendt understands it.³

We can now turn to some critical responses to Arendt’s account of action. The argument Arendt makes in setting out the distinctions between labour, work and action is profound and consequently the conclusions she draws are controversial. A brief survey of several prominent criticisms of *vita activa* will help deepen our understanding of her views. First, Arendt has been accused of “amoralism” or even “immoralism” because, it is claimed, action is focused on the glory and heroism of the political actor, her performance and the response of her audience, rather than on what action the political actor performs or her motivations for acting. George Kateb says: “Arendt in her Greek thinking suggests that political action does not exist to do justice or fulfill other moral purposes. The supreme achievement of political action is existential, and the stakes are seemingly higher than moral ones” (Kateb 1984: 31). Arendt’s insistence that action must be undertaken for its own sake leads to an uneasy connection with morality. If we subsume political action to moral purposes and insist that political action be motivated by moral principles then action becomes a means to achieve an ulterior end. Likewise, if political action is aimed at achieving justice then once again it is a mere means towards an ulterior end. Political action must be free of these constraints if it is to be *sui generis*, as Arendt requires. However, this means that a political action may be admirable in Arendt’s sense yet reprehensible in a moral sense. If genuine action aims at no moral good and cannot be judged by the principles and standards of morality, then this presents a seemingly significant problem for Arendt’s view.

A second, related, criticism concerns the content of action. Arendt seems unconcerned with what political actions are about. Instead, as we saw above, she is interested in how an action is revelatory of the character of the actor and how an action initiates something “new” in the world. However, some critics think that it matters greatly what the content of an action is.⁴ This is particularly so when we are concerned with political action. What makes an action political surely has to do with its content, with what it aims at and what it accomplishes. Divorcing content from action suggests a political aestheticism that some critics find objectionable.⁵ Moreover, if action is divorced from morality and its value is independent of its content, then how are we to distinguish between the political acts of fascists, for example, and those who strive for democracy? This is especially puzzling because of Arendt’s personal history of resisting Nazi fascism and the fact that she is among the first to theorize the distinctive evil of totalitarian politics.

It is worth noting a third criticism here before we look at an attempt to address these worries. It is argued that Arendt’s view of action

encourages an “elitist” view of history (see Passerin d’Entrèves 1994: 95–7). History, on her account, becomes a narrative populated by the deeds of great men. This archaic understanding of history leaves aside the significance and place of men and women whose lives are not lionized in poems and tales of great deeds. It is true that when Arendt draws on historical examples she chooses people who were “great men” and it is also true that the politically and socially marginalized are mentioned mostly in passing and usually with little interest or sympathy.

We should note here a bifurcation in Arendt’s thinking on political action between a focus on individuals and a focus on democratic practices – between agents and the *polis*. The former concern is with how action is revelatory of the *who*, whereas the latter is a concern with the political context that enables action to take place. Maurizio Passerin d’Entrèves has argued that this bifurcation signals a tension in Arendt’s thinking between what he calls an expressive model of action and a communicative model of action (*ibid.*: 84–5). The expressive model advances a conception of politics as a pursuit of individual excellence in which heroic men display and are applauded for their courage and achievements. On this view, politics is an arena for the demonstration of humanity’s most distinctive traits. Economic and social concerns on the other hand belong outside the *polis* with the practices of labour and work.

On the other hand, the communicative model shows Arendt interested in democratic practices and the requirements of political action within a community of citizens. Here she is alert to the many ways that societies constrain and restrict speech and action and thus undermine the possibility of real democratic power. Here she is concerned with the idea of unconstrained deliberation between political equals and mapping out an idea of political legitimacy as distinct from forms of state violence. Passerin d’Entrèves argues that Arendt moves uneasily between these two models of political action and that her critics have largely focused on the expressive model and taken these criticisms to apply to the whole of Arendt’s thought. He suggests that the sorts of criticisms we rehearsed above apply, when they do, mainly to the expressive model and not to the communicative model.

If morality is distinct from political action on the expressive model, some form of moral constraint reappears in the communicative model. Dana Villa has argued that if we take unconstrained deliberation as the foundation of Arendt’s notion of politics, then we see that action, as speech, is the “basis of non-violent, non-coercive being and acting together” (Villa 1996: 32). Privileging speech in the form of deliberation between citizens within a political community automatically rules

out certain forms of coercion, fraud and violence. Villa goes further to argue more generally that for Arendt political action, properly understood, is aimed at the “creation” and “expansion” of the public sphere. On this interpretation we can clearly distinguish between the politics of fascism and the politics of democracy, and so following the communicative model, we alleviate some of the worries that concerned us earlier.

However, the distinction between the models is not airtight. Some of the earlier worries re-emerge when we recall the sharp difference that Arendt insists on between the political and the social. The social, as we mentioned earlier, includes economic concerns and Arendt understands these issues to fall within the realm of necessity. Politics is the realm of freedom. However, as Villa and others have pointed out, economic and social issues loom large when we think about *access* to deliberation. Who speaks and who is listened to is as much a matter of economic status as it is a matter of political will. Arendt’s public sphere is, in principle, open to all citizens equally but the facts overwhelmingly demonstrate that the poor and the marginalized are denied access to the public sphere and so cannot speak as equals with their fellow citizens. If politics cannot be concerned with social issues and thus with matters of access to the public sphere, then Arendt’s idea of unconstrained deliberation between equal citizens is seriously jeopardized. On the other hand, if politics does allow in social concerns, then Arendt’s quarantine of the political and the social is breached. As many of Arendt’s critics have said, there needs to be a place for morality and justice in her account of political action. The intriguing question is how this can be achieved while at the same time preserving the enormously valuable insights of her account of political action.

Notes

1. See Dana Villa’s (1996) extensive account of the background to the *vita activa*.
2. See his discussion of Arendt’s debt to Aristotle in Villa (1996: chapters 1 and 2).
3. Arendt’s only sustained discussion of this topic argues for an elaborate, tiered, council system (Arendt 1963: 258–9).
4. For example Hanna Pitkin questions Arendt’s account when she says: “But there is more wrong here than injustice. On this account, I suggest, one cannot even make sense of politics itself; even for those admitted to its benefits, it can be no real benefit. To see what I mean, put two questions to Arendt: What keeps these citizens together as a body? And what is it that they talk about together, in that endless palaver in the agora?” (Pitkin 1981: 336).
5. See, for example, Martin Jay’s (1978) attempt to connect Arendt’s work with the “political existentialists” such as Carl Schmitt.