

THINKING  
◆◆◆ WITHOUT A ◆◆◆  
BANISTER

*Essays in Understanding, 1953-1975*

Hannah Arendt

Edited and with an Introduction by  
Jerome Kohn



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## LABOR, WORK, ACTION

For this short hour, I should like to raise an apparently odd question. My question is: What does an active life consist of? What do we do when we are active? In asking this question, I shall assume that the age-old distinction between two ways of life, between a *vita contemplativa* and a *vita activa*, which we encounter in our tradition of philosophical and religious thought up to the threshold of the modern age, is valid, and that when we speak of contemplation and action we speak not only of certain human faculties but of two distinct ways of life. Surely, the question is of some relevance. For even if we don't contest the traditional assumption that contemplation is of a higher order than action, or that all action actually is but a means whose true end is contemplation, we can't doubt—and no one ever doubted—that it is quite possible for human beings to go through life without ever indulging in contemplation, while, on the other hand, no man can remain in the contemplative state throughout his whole life. Active life, in other words, is not only what most men are engaged in but even what no man can escape altogether. For it is in the nature of the human condition that contemplation remains dependent upon all sorts of activities—it depends upon labor to produce whatever is necessary to keep the human organism alive, it depends upon work to create whatever is needed to house the human body, and it needs action in order to organize the living together of many human beings in such a way that peace, the condition for the quiet of contemplation, is assured.

Since I started with our tradition, I just described the three chief articulations of active life in a traditional way, that is, as serving the ends of contemplation. It is only natural that active life has always been described by those who themselves followed the contemplative way of life. Hence, the *vita activa* was always defined from the viewpoint of contemplation; com-

pared with the absolute quiet of contemplation, all sorts of human activity appeared to be similar insofar as they were characterized by un-quiet, by something negative, by *a-skholia* or by *nec-octium*, nonleisure or absence of the conditions which make contemplation possible. Compared with this quietude, all distinctions and articulations within the *vita activa* disappear. Seen from the viewpoint of contemplation, it does not matter what disturbs the necessary quiet as long as it is disturbed.

Traditionally therefore the *vita activa* received its meaning from the *vita contemplativa*; a very restricted dignity was bestowed upon it because it served the needs and wants of contemplation in a living body. Christianity with its belief in a hereafter, whose joys announce themselves in the delights of contemplation, conferred a religious sanction upon the abasement of the *vita activa* while, on the other hand, the command to love your neighbor acted as a counterweight against this sanction unknown to antiquity. Yet the determination of the order itself, according to which contemplation was the highest of the human faculties, was Greek, and not Christian in origin; it coincided with the discovery of contemplation as the philosopher's way of life, which as such was found superior to the political way of life of the citizen of the polis. The point of the matter, which I can only mention here in passing, is that Christianity, contrary to what has frequently been assumed, did not elevate active life to a higher position, did not save it from its being derivative, and did not, at least not theoretically, look upon it as something that has its meaning and end within itself. And a change in this hierarchical order was indeed impossible so long as truth was the one comprehensive principle to establish an order among the human faculties, a truth moreover, which was understood as revelation, as something essentially given to man, as distinguished from truth being either the result of some mental activity—thought or reasoning—or as that knowledge which I acquire through making.

Hence, the question arises: Why was the *vita activa*, with all its distinction and articulations, not discovered after the modern break with tradition and the eventual reversal of its hierarchical order, the "revaluation of all values," through Marx and Nietzsche? And the answer, though in actual analysis quite complicated, may be summed up briefly here: it is the very nature of the famed turning upside-down of philosophic systems or hier-

archies of values that the conceptual framework itself is left intact. This is especially true for Marx who was convinced that turning Hegel upside down was enough to find the truth—i.e., the truth of the Hegelian system, which is the discovery of the dialectical nature of history.

Let me shortly explain how this identity shows itself in our context. When I enumerated the chief human activities: Labor-Work-Action, it was obvious that action occupied the highest position. Insofar as action related to the political sphere of human life, this estimation agrees with the pre-philosophic, pre-Platonic current opinion of Greek polis life. The introduction of contemplation as the highest point of the hierarchy had the result that this order was in fact rearranged, though not always in explicit theory. (Lip service to the old hierarchy was frequently paid when it had already been reversed in the actual teaching of the philosophers.) Seen from the viewpoint of contemplation, the highest activity was not action but work; the rise of the activity of the craftsman in the scale of estimations makes its first dramatic appearance in Plato's dialogues. Labor, to be sure, remained at the bottom, but political activity as something necessary for the life of contemplation was now recognized only to the extent that it could be pursued in the same way as the activity of the craftsman. Only if seen in the image of work, could political action be trusted to produce lasting results. And such lasting results meant peace, the peace needed for contemplation: No change.

If you now look upon the reversal in the modern age, you are immediately aware that its most important feature in this respect is its glorification of labor, surely the last thing any member of one of the classical communities, be it Rome or Greece, would have thought of as worthy of this position. However, the moment you go deeper into this matter you will see that not labor as such occupied this position (Adam Smith, Locke, Marx are unanimous in their contempt for menial tasks, unskilled labor which helps only to consume), but *productive* labor. Again the standard of lasting results is the actual yardstick. Thus Marx, surely the greatest of the labor philosophers, was constantly trying to reinterpret labor in the image of the working activity—again at the expense of political activity. To be sure, things had changed. Political activity was no longer seen as the laying down of immutable laws which would *make* a commonwealth, having

as its end result a reliable product that looked exactly as if it had originated in a blueprint by the maker—as though laws or constitutions were things of the same nature as the table fabricated by the carpenter according to a blueprint he had in mind before he began to make it. Political activity was now supposed to “make history”—a phrase that occurred for the first time in Vico—and not a commonwealth, and this history, as we all know, had for its end product the classless society, which would be the end of the historical process just as the table is indeed the end of the fabrication process. In other words, since on the theoretical level no more was done by the great revaluators of the old values than to turn things upside-down, the old hierarchy within the *vita activa* was hardly disturbed; the old modes of thinking prevailed, and the only relevant distinction between the new and the old was that this order, whose origin and meaningfulness lay in the actual experience of contemplation, became highly questionable. For the actual event which characterizes the modern age in this respect was that contemplation itself had become meaningless.

With this event we shall not deal here. Instead, accepting the oldest, pre-philosophical hierarchy, I propose to look into these activities themselves. And the first thing of which you might have become aware by now is my distinction between labor and work which probably sounded somewhat unusual to you. I draw it from a rather casual remark in Locke who speaks of “the labor of our body and the work of our hands.” (Laborers, in Aristotelian language, are those who “with their bodies administer to the needs of life.”) The phenomenal evidence in favor of this distinction is too striking to be ignored, and yet it is a fact that, apart from a few scattered remarks and important testimony of social and institutional history, there is hardly anything to support it.

Against this scarcity of evidence stands the simple obstinate fact that every European language, ancient or modern, contains two etymologically unrelated words for what we have come to think of as the same activity: Thus, the Greek distinguished between *ponein* and *ergazesthai*, the Latin between *laborare* and *facere* or *fabricari*, the French between *travailler* and *ouvrer*, the German between *arbeiten* and *werken*. In all these cases, the equivalents for labor have an unequivocal connotation of bodily experiences, of toil and trouble, and in most cases they are significantly also used

for the pangs of birth. The last to use this original connection was Marx, who defined labor as the "reproduction of individual life" and begetting, the production of "foreign life," as the production of the species.

If we leave aside all theories, especially the modern labor theories after Marx, and follow solely the etymological and historical evidence, it is obvious that labor is an activity which corresponds to the biological processes of the body, that it is, as the young Marx said, the metabolism between man and nature, or the human mode of this metabolism which we share with all living organisms. By laboring, men produce the vital necessities that must be fed into the life process of the human body. And since this life process, though it leads us from birth to death in a rectilinear progress of decay, is in itself circular, the laboring activity itself must follow the cycle of life, the circular movement of our bodily functions, which means that the laboring activity never comes to an end as long as life lasts; it is endlessly repetitive. Unlike working, whose end has come when the object is finished, ready to be added to the common world of things and objects, laboring always moves in the same circle prescribed by the living organism, and the end of its toil and trouble comes only with the end, i.e., the death of the individual organism.

Labor, in other words, produces consumer goods, and laboring and consuming are but two stages of the ever-recurring cycle of biological life. These two stages of the life process follow each other so closely that they almost constitute one and the same movement, which is hardly ended when it must be started all over again. Labor, unlike all other human activities, stands under the sign of necessity, the "necessity of subsisting" as Locke used to say, or the "eternal necessity imposed by nature" in the words of Marx. Hence, the actual goal of the revolution in Marx is not merely the emancipation of the laboring or working classes, but the emancipation of man from labor. For "the realm of freedom begins only where labor determined through want" and the immediacy of "physical needs" ends. And this emancipation, as we know now, to the extent that it is possible at all, occurs not by political emancipation—the equality of all classes of the citizenry—but through technology. I said: To the extent that it is possible, and I meant by this qualification that consumption, as a stage of the cyclical movement of the living organism is in a way also laborious.

Goods for consumption, the immediate result of the laboring process, are the least durable of tangible things. They are, as Locke pointed out, “of short duration, such as—if they are not consumed—will decay and perish by themselves.” After a brief stay in the world, they return into the natural process that yielded them either through absorption into the life process of the human animal or through decay; in their man-made forms they disappear more quickly than any other parts of the world. They are the least worldly and, at the same time, the most natural and the most necessary of all things. Although they are man-made, they come and go, are produced and consumed, in accordance with the ever-recurrent cyclical movement of nature. Hence, they cannot be “heaped up” and “stored away,” as would have been necessary if they were to serve Locke’s main purpose, to establish the validity of private property on the rights men have to their own body.

But while labor in the sense of producing anything lasting—something outlasting the activity itself and even the life span of the producer—is quite “unproductive” and futile, it is highly productive in another sense. Man’s labor power is such that he produces more consumer goods than is necessary for the survival of himself and his family. This, as it were, natural abundance of the laboring process has enabled men to enslave or exploit their fellow men, thus liberating themselves from life’s burden; and while this liberation of the few has always been achieved through the use of force by a ruling class, it would never have been possible without this inherent fertility of human labor itself. Yet even this specifically human “productivity” is part and parcel of nature, it partakes of this superabundance we see everywhere in nature’s household. It is but another mode of “Be ye fruitful and multiply” in which it is as if nature herself speaks to us.

Since labor corresponds to the condition of life itself, it partakes not only in life’s toil and trouble but also in the sheer bliss with which we can experience our being alive. The “blessing or the joy of labor,” which plays so great a part in modern labor theories, is no empty notion. Man, the author of the human artifice, which we call the world in distinction to nature, and men, who are always involved with each other through action and speech, are by no means merely natural beings. But insofar as we, too, are just living creatures, laboring is the only way we can also remain and swing content-

edly in nature's prescribed cycle, toiling and resting, laboring and consuming, with the same happy and purposeless regularity with which day and night, life and death follow each other. The reward of labor, though it does not leave anything behind itself, is even more real, less futile than any other form of happiness. It lies in nature's fertility, in the quiet confidence that he who in "toil and trouble" has done his part remains a part of nature in the future of his children and his children's children. The Old Testament, which, unlike classical antiquity, held life to be sacred and therefore neither death nor labor to be an evil (certainly not an argument against life), shows in the stories of the patriarchs how unconcerned about death they were and how death came to them in the familiar shape of night and quiet and eternal rest "in a good old age and full of years."

The blessing of life as a whole, inherent in labor, can never be found in work and should not be mistaken for the inevitably brief spell of joy that follows accomplishment and attends achievement. The blessing of labor is that effort and gratification follow each other as closely as producing and consuming, so that happiness is a concomitant of the process itself. There is no lasting happiness and contentment for human beings outside the prescribed cycle of painful exhaustion and pleasurable regeneration. Whatever throws this cycle out of balance—misery where exhaustion is followed by wretchedness or, on the other hand, an entirely effortless life in which boredom takes the place of exhaustion and the mills of necessity, of consumption and digestion, grind an impotent human body mercilessly to death—ruins the elemental happiness that comes from being alive. An element of laboring is present in all human activities, even the highest, insofar as they are undertaken as "routine" jobs by which we make our living and keep ourselves alive. Their very repetitiveness, which more often than not we feel to be a burden that exhausts us, is what provides that minimum of animal contentment for which the great and meaningful spells of joy that are rare and never last, can never substitute, and without which the longer lasting though equally rare spells of real grief and sorrow could hardly be borne.

The work of our hands, as distinguished from the labor of our bodies, fabricates the sheer unending variety of things whose sum total constitutes the human artifice, the world we live in. They are not consumer goods but

use-objects, and their proper use does not cause them to disappear. They give the world the stability and solidity without which it could not be relied upon to house the unstable and mortal creature that is man.

To be sure, the durability of the world of things is not absolute; we do not consume use things but use them up, and if we don't, they will simply deteriorate, return into the overall process from which they were drawn and against which they were erected by us. If left to itself or expelled from the human world, the chair will again become wood, and the wood will decay and return to the soil from which the tree sprang before it was cut down to become the material with which men work and build. However, while usage is bound to use up these objects, this end is not planned before, it was not the goal for which it was made, as the "destruction" or immediate consumption of the bread is its inherent end; what usage wears out is durability. In other words, destruction, though unavoidable, is incidental to use but inherent in consumption. What distinguishes the most flimsy pair of shoes from mere consumer goods is that they do not spoil if I don't wear them, they are objects and therefore possess a certain "objective" independence of their own, however modest. Used or unused they will remain in the world for a certain while unless they are wantonly destroyed.

It is this durability that gives the things of the world their relative independence from the men who produced and use them, their "objectivity" that makes them withstand, "stand against" and endure at least for a time the voracious needs and wants of their living users. From this viewpoint, the things of the world have the function of stabilizing human life, and their objectivity lies in the fact that men, their ever-changing nature notwithstanding, can retrieve their identity by being related to the enduring sameness of objects, the same chair today and tomorrow, the same house, at least formerly, from birth to death. Against the subjectivity of men stands the objectivity of the man-made artifice, not the indifference of nature. Only because we have erected a world of objects from what nature gives us and have built this artificial environment into nature, thus also protecting us from her, can we look upon nature as something "objective." Without a world between men and nature, there would be eternal movement, but no objectivity.

Durability and objectivity are the result of fabrication, the work of *homo*

*faber*. It consists of reification. Solidity, inherent in even the most fragile things, comes ultimately from matter which is transformed into material. Material is already a product of human hands that have removed it from its natural location, either killing a life process, as in the case of the tree which provides wood, or interrupting one of nature's slower processes, as in the case of iron, stone, or marble torn out of the womb of the earth. This element of violation and violence is present in all fabrication, and man as the creator of the human artifice has always been a destroyer of nature. The experience of this violence is the most elemental experience of human strength, and by the same token the very opposite of the painful, exhausting effort experienced in sheer labor. This is no longer the earning of one's bread "in the sweat of his brow," in which man may indeed be the lord and master of all living creatures but still remains the servant of nature, his own natural needs, and of the earth. *Homo faber* becomes lord and master of nature herself insofar as he violates and partly destroys what was given to him.

The process of making is itself entirely determined by the categories of means and end. The fabricated thing is an end product in the twofold sense that the production process comes to an end in it and that it is only a means to produce this end. Unlike the laboring activity, where labor and consumption are only two stages of an identical process—the life of the individual or of society—fabrication and usage are two altogether different processes. The end of the fabrication process has come when the thing is finished, and this process need not be replaced. The impulse toward repetition comes from the craftsman's need to earn his means of subsistence, that is, from the element of labor inherent in his work. It also may come from the demand for multiplication on the market. In either case, the process is repeated for reasons outside itself, unlike the compulsory repetition inherent in laboring, where one must eat in order to labor and must labor in order to eat. Multiplication should not be confused with repetition, although it may be felt by the individual craftsman as mere repetition which a machine can better and more productively achieve. Multiplication actually multiplies things, whereas repetition merely follows the recurrent cycle of life in which its products disappear almost as fast as they have appeared.

To have a definite beginning and a definite predictable end is the mark

of fabrication, which through this characteristic alone distinguishes itself from all other human activities. Labor, caught in the cyclical movement of the biological process, has neither a beginning nor an end properly speaking—only pauses, intervals between exhaustion and regeneration. Action, though it may have a definite beginning, never, as we shall see, has a predictable end. This great reliability of work is reflected in that the fabrication process, unlike action, is not irreversible: every thing produced by human hands can be destroyed by them, and no use-object is so urgently needed in the life process that its maker cannot survive and afford its destruction. Man, the fabricator of the human artifice, his own world, is indeed a lord and master, not only because he has set himself up as the master of all nature, but because he is master of himself and his doings. This is true neither of laboring, where men remain subject to the necessity of their life, nor of acting, where they remain in dependence upon their fellow men. Alone with his image of the future product, *homo faber* is free to produce, and facing alone the work of his hands, he is free to destroy.

I said before that all fabrication processes are determined by the category of means and end. This shows itself most clearly in the enormous role which tools and instruments play in it. From the standpoint of *homo faber*, man is indeed, as Benjamin Franklin said, a “tool-maker.” To be sure, tools and implements are also used in the laboring process, as every housewife proudly owning all the gadgets of a modern kitchen knows; but these implements have a different character and function when used for laboring; they serve to lighten the burden by mechanizing the labor of the laborer. They are, as it were, anthropocentric, whereas the tools of fabrication are designed and invented for the fabrication of things, their fitness and precision dictated by “objective” aims rather than subjective needs and wants. Moreover, every fabrication process produces things that last considerably longer than the process which brought them into existence, whereas in the laboring process, bringing forth these goods of “short duration,” the tools and instruments it uses are the only things which survive the laboring process itself. They are useful for labor, and as such not the result of the laboring activity itself. What dominates laboring with one’s body, and incidentally all work processes performed in the mode of laboring, is neither the purposeful effort nor the product itself, but the motion of the

process and rhythm it imposes upon the laborers. Labor's implements are drawn into this rhythm where body and tool swing in the same repetitive movement—until in the use of machines, it is no longer the body's movement that determines the movement of the implement, but the machine's movement that enforces the movements of the body, and which, in a more advanced state, replaces it altogether. It seems to me highly characteristic that the much discussed question of whether man should be "adjusted" to the machine or the machines should be adjusted to the nature of man never arose with respect to mere tools or instruments. And the reason is that all tools of workmanship remain the servants of the hand, whereas machines demand that the laborer should serve them, adjust the natural rhythm of his body to their mechanical movement. In other words, even the most refined tool remains a servant unable to guide or to replace the hand; even the most primitive machine guides and ideally replaces the body's labor.

The most fundamental experience we have with instrumentality arises out of the fabrication process. Here it is indeed true that the end justifies the means; it does more, it produces and organizes them. The end justifies the violence done to nature to win the material, as the wood justifies killing the tree, and the table justifies destroying the wood. In the same way, the end product organizes the work process itself, decides about the needed specialists, the measure of cooperation, the number of assistants and cooperators. Hence, everything and everybody is judged here in terms of suitability and usefulness for the desired end product, and nothing else.

Strangely enough, the validity of the means-end category is not exhausted with the finished product for which everything and everybody becomes a means. Though the object is an end with respect to the means by which it was produced and the actual end of the making process, it never becomes, so to speak, an end in itself, at least not as long as it remains an object for use. It immediately takes its place in another means-end chain by virtue of its very usefulness; as a mere use-object it becomes a means for, let us say, comfortable living, or as an exchange object, that is, insofar as a definite value has been bestowed upon the material used for fabrication it becomes a means for obtaining other objects. In other words, in a strictly utilitarian world, all ends are bound to be of short duration; they are transformed into means for some further ends. Once the end is attained, it ceases

to be an end, it becomes an object among objects which at any moment can be transformed into means to pursue further ends. The perplexity of utilitarianism, the philosophy, as it were, of *homo faber*, is that it gets caught in the unending chain of means and ends without ever arriving at some principle which could justify the category, that is, the utility itself.

The usual way out of this dilemma is to make the user, man himself, the ultimate end to stop the unending chain of ends and means. That man is an end in himself and should never be used as a means to pursue other ends, no matter how elevated these might be, is well known to us from the moral philosophy of Kant, and there is no doubt that Kant wanted first of all to relegate the means-end category and its philosophy of utilitarianism to its proper place and prevent it from ruling the relations between man and man instead of the relationship between men and things. However, even Kant's intrinsically paradoxical formula fails to solve the perplexities of *homo faber*. By elevating man the user into the position of an ultimate end, he degrades even more forcefully all other "ends" to mere means. If man the user is the highest end, "the measure of all things," then not only nature, treated by fabrication as the almost "worthless material" upon which to work and to bestow "value" (as Locke said), but the valuable things themselves have become mere means, losing thereby their own intrinsic worth. Or to put it another way, the most worldly of all activities loses its original objective meaning, it becomes a means to fulfill subjective needs; in and by itself, it is no longer meaningful, no matter how useful it may be.

From the viewpoint of fabrication the finished product is as much an end in itself, an independent durable entity with an existence of its own, as man is an end in himself in Kant's moral philosophy. Of course, the issue at stake here is not instrumentality as such, the use of means to achieve an end, but rather the generalization of the fabrication experience in which usefulness and utility are established as the ultimate standards for the world as well as for the life of acting men moving in it. *Homo faber*, we can say, has transgressed the limits of his activity when, under the guise of utilitarianism, he proposes that instrumentality rule the realm of the finished world as exclusively as it rules the activity through which all things contained in it come into being. This generalization will always be the specific temptation of *homo faber* although, in the final analysis, it will be his own undoing: he

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will be left with meaninglessness in the midst of usefulness; utilitarianism never can find the answer to the question Lessing once put to utilitarian philosophers of his time: "And what, if you please, is the use of use?"

In the sphere of fabrication itself, there is only one kind of objects to which the unending chain of means and ends does not apply, and this is the work of art, the most useless and, at the same time, the most durable thing human hands can produce. Its very characteristic is its remoteness from the whole context of ordinary usage, so that in case a former object, say a piece of furniture of a bygone age, is considered by a later generation to be a "masterpiece," it is put into a museum and thus carefully removed from any possible usage. Just as the purpose of a chair is actualized when it is sat upon, the inherent purpose of a work of art—whether the artist knows it or not, whether the purpose is achieved or not—is to attain permanence throughout the ages. Nowhere does the sheer durability of the man-made world appear in such purity and clarity, nowhere else therefore does this thing-world reveal itself so spectacularly as the nonmortal home for mortal beings. And though the actual source of inspiration of these permanent things is thought, this does not prevent their being things. The thought process no more produces anything tangible than the sheer ability to use tools produces objects. It is the reification that occurs in writing something down, painting an image, composing a piece of music, etc. which actually *makes* the thought a reality; and in order to produce these thought things, which we usually call artworks, the same workmanship is required that through the primordial instrument of human hands builds the other less durable and more useful things of the human artifice.

The man-made world of things becomes a home for mortal men, whose stability will endure and outlast the ever-changing movement of their lives and deeds, only insofar as it transcends both the sheer functionalism of consumer goods and the sheer utility of use objects. Life in its nonbiological sense, that is, the span of time each man is given between birth and death, manifests itself in action and speech, to which now we will turn our attention. 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. Since through birth we came into being, we share with all other entities the quality of *oth-*

*erness*, an important aspect of plurality that makes it possible for us to define only by distinction: we are unable to say what anything *is* without distinguishing it from something else. In addition to this we share with all living organisms distinguishing marks that make us individual entities. However, only man can *express* otherness and individuality, only he can distinguish and communicate *himself*, and not merely some affect—thirst or hunger, affection or hostility, or fear. In man, otherness and distinctness become uniqueness, for what he inserts with word and deed into the company of his kind is unique. This insertion is not forced upon us through necessity like labor and it is not prompted by wants and desires like work. It has no such conditions; its impulse springs from the beginning that came into the world when we were born and to which we respond by beginning something new of our own initiative. To act, in its most general sense, means to initiate, to begin, as the Greek word *archein* indicates, or to set something into motion, which is the original meaning of the Latin *agere*.

All human activities are conditioned by the fact of human plurality, that not one man, but men in the plural inhabit the earth and in one way or another live together. But only action and speech relate specifically to this fact that to live always means to live among men, among those who are my equals. Hence, when I insert myself into the world, it is a world where others are already present. Action and speech are so closely related because the primordial and specifically human act must always also answer the question asked of every newcomer: "Who are you?" The disclosure of "who somebody is" is implicit in the fact that speechless action somehow does not exist, or if it exists it is irrelevant; without speech, action loses the actor, and the doer of deeds is possible only to the extent that he is at the same time the speaker of words, who identifies himself as the actor and announces what he is doing, what he has done, or what he intends to do. It is exactly as Dante once said—and more succinctly than I could (*De Monarchia*, I, 13): "For in every action what is primarily intended by the doer . . . is the disclosure of his own image. Hence it comes about that every doer, in so far as he does, takes delight in doing; since everything that desires its own being, and since in action the being of the doer is somehow intensified, delight necessarily follows. . . . Thus nothing acts unless by acting it makes patent its latent self." To be sure, the disclosure of

“who” always remains hidden from the person himself—like the *daimon* in Greek religion who accompanies man throughout his life, always peering over his shoulder from behind and thus visible only to those he encounters. Still, though unknown to the person, action is intensely personal. Action without a name, a “who” attached to it, is meaningless whereas an artwork retains its relevance whether or not we know the master’s name. Let me remind you of the monuments to the Unknown Soldier after World War I. They bear testimony to the need for finding a “who,” an identifiable somebody whom four years of mass slaughter should have revealed. The unwillingness to resign oneself to the brutal fact that the agent of the war was actually *nobody* inspired the erection of the monuments to the unknown ones—that is to all those whom the war had failed to make known, robbing them thereby, not of their achievement, but of their human dignity.

Wherever men live together, there exists a web of human relationships which is, as it were, woven by the deeds and words of innumerable persons, by the living as well as by the dead. Every deed and every new beginning falls into an already existing web, where it nevertheless somehow starts a new process that will affect many others even beyond those with whom the agent comes into direct contact. It is because of this already existing web of human relationships with its conflicting wills and intentions, that action almost never achieves its purpose. And it is also because of this medium and the attendant quality of unpredictability that action always produces stories, with or without intention, as naturally as fabrication produces tangible things. These stories may then be recorded in documents and monuments, they may be told in poetry and historiography, and worked into all kinds of material. They themselves, however, are of an entirely different nature from these reifications. They tell us more about their subjects, the “hero” in each story, than any product the human hands ever tells us about the master who produced it, and yet they are not products properly speaking. Although everybody starts his own story, at least his own life story, nobody is the author or producer of it. And yet, it is precisely in these stories that the actual meaning of a human life finally reveals itself. That every individual life between birth and death can eventually be told as a story with beginning and end is the pre-political and pre-historical condition of history, the great story without beginning and end. But the reason

why each human life tells its story and why history ultimately becomes the storybook of mankind, with many actors and speakers and yet without any recognizable author, is that both are the outcome of action. The real story in which we are engaged as long as we live has no visible or invisible maker because it is not *made*.

The absence of a maker in this realm accounts for the extraordinary frailty and unreliability of strictly human affairs. Since we always act into a web of relationships, the consequences of each deed are boundless, every action touches off not only a reaction but a chain reaction, every process is the cause of unpredictable new processes. This boundlessness is inescapable; it could not be cured by restricting one's acting to a limited graspable framework or circumstances or by feeding all pertinent material into giant computers. The smallest act in the most limited circumstances bears the seed of the same boundlessness and unpredictability; one deed, one gesture, one word may suffice to change every constellation. In acting, in contradistinction to working, it is indeed true that we can really never know what we are doing.

There stands however in stark contrast to this frailty and unreliability of human affairs another character of human action which seems to make it even more dangerous than we would otherwise assume. And this is the simple fact that, though we don't know what we are doing when we are acting, we have no possibility ever to undo what we have done. The processes of action are not only unpredictable, they are also irreversible, which is to say that in action there is no author or maker who can undo or destroy what he has done if he does not like it or when the consequences prove disastrous. This peculiar resiliency of action, apparently in opposition to the frailty of its results, would be altogether unbearable if this capability had not some remedy within its own range.

The possible redemption from the predicament of irreversibility is the faculty of forgiving, and the remedy for unpredictability is contained in the faculty to make and keep promises. The two remedies belong together: forgiving relates to the past and serves to undo its deeds, while binding oneself through promises serves to establish in the ocean of future uncertainty islands of security without which continuity, let alone durability, of any kind, would ever be possible in the relationships between men. Without

being forgiven, released from the consequences of what we have done, our capacity to act would, as it were, be confined to one single deed from which we could never recover; we would remain the victims of its consequences forever, not unlike the sorcerer's apprentice who lacked the magic formula to break the spell. Without being bound to the fulfillment of promises, we would never be able to achieve the identity and continuity which together produce the "person" about whom a story can be told; each of us would be condemned to wander helplessly and without any direction in the darkness of his own lonely heart, caught in its ever-changing moods, contradictions, and equivocalities. But this personal identity, achieved through binding oneself in promises, must be distinguished from the "objective," i.e., object-related, identity that arises out of being confronted with the sameness of chairs and houses, which I mentioned in the earlier discussion of work. In this respect, forgiving and making promises are like control mechanisms built into the very faculty to start new and endless processes.

Without action, without the capacity to start something new and thus articulate the new beginning that comes into the world with the birth of each human being, the life of man, spent between birth and death, would inevitably be doomed beyond salvation. The life span itself would be running toward death, inevitably carrying everything human to ruin and destruction. Action, with all its uncertainties, is like an ever-present reminder that men, though they must die, are not born in order to die but in order to begin something new. *Initium ut esset homo creatus est*—"that there be a beginning man was created," said Augustine. With the creation of man, the principle of beginning came into the world—which, of course, is only another way of saying that with the creation of man, the principle of freedom appeared on earth.

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