

Natality and *Dasein*: Exploring Action in the Thought of Hannah Arendt and Martin Heidegger

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One of the perennial questions of philosophy is the question of the place and role, if any, of freedom. I intend to come at the question by looking at it through two twentieth century thinkers, Martin Heidegger and Hannah Arendt, whose ideas, though coming from the same tradition, have radically different consequences for how men are to view their place in the world, and their capacity to act. I propose to explore some of the fundamental aspects of their thought, with the intention of showing in what ways they are at variance. This analysis will then bring us to a point where we can see that Heidegger, in his denouncement of metaphysics and humanism, rejects the notion of freedom. Arendt, a former student of Heidegger's, on the other hand, will make freedom, the spontaneity of human natality, and the proper place of men in the public realm, the center of her political philosophy. In the end we will see that Arendt succeeds in establishing a practical approach to the expression of human freedom within the world in general, and in the political realm in particular. Where Heidegger's philosophy purported human freedom to be untenable, Arendt asserted that with the emergence of individual humans comes the advent of freedom.

The philosophy of the existential phenomenologist Martin Heidegger is concerned with the Ontological Question—it seeks to understand what it means to *be*. *Dasein* (literally “being-here”) is Heidegger's term for our mode of being: “This being which we ourselves in each case are and which includes inquiry among the possibilities of its Being we formulate terminologically as *Dasein*.”¹ Moreover, this mode of being is temporal: “The Being of *Dasein* finds its meaning in temporality. But temporality is at the same time the condition of the possibility of historicity as a

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temporal mode of being of *Dasein* itself, regardless of whether and how it is a being in time...Historicity means the constitution of Being of the “occurrence” of *Dasein* as such...In its factual Being *Dasein* is as and “what” it already is.”² Heidegger’s implicit rejection of freedom, conceived for our purpose as the ability to remove oneself from the givenness of tradition and history, comes as a result of *Dasein*’s historicism: “*Dasein* not only has the inclination to be ensnared in the world in which it is and to interpret itself in terms of that world by its reflected light; at the same time *Dasein* is also ensnared in a tradition which it more or less explicitly grasps. This tradition deprives *Dasein* of its own leadership in questioning and choosing.”³ For Heidegger, *Dasein*’s placement in the world is haphazard; that is to say, it is not open to free choice, but is subject to the tradition which is always already there. Heidegger is then left to consider the consequences of this for human existence.

One consequence is the altered character of action and thought. In the *Letter on Humanism*, Heidegger says of action “...the essence of action is accomplishment. To accomplish means to unfold something into the fullness of its essence, to lead it forth into this fullness...Therefore only what already is can be accomplished. But what “is” above all is Being.”⁴ Being, then, accomplishes action, and not *Dasein* which is only humanity’s mode of being. As a result Being is the locus of action, and not humans.

Heidegger’s philosophy extracts the notion of human freedom from the philosophic vernacular and replaces it with the destining of *Dasein* revealed in the unfolding of history. Action and understanding, then, occur not as a result of humans but of Being. Hannah Arendt, who was a former student of Heidegger’s, took up the mantle of existential phenomenology. However, her views depart from those of Heidegger in a significant way with regard to how action emerges in the world. Though ultimately she

may agree with Heidegger that we cannot have control over the future course of events (that is to say, we cannot design the future), the view she puts forth sees individuals, and not Being, as an active force in the unfolding of history.

In Arendt's philosophy, action, the faculty of freedom, is an altogether different faculty from that of a number of different phenomena often associated with it. Under the general category the *Vita Activa*, Arendt places Labor, Work and Action. Labor and work, Arendt argues, are often conflated concepts. She asserts that Labor is a process (*poiesis*), unending and necessary for human life; it is labor, the activity of the *animal laborans*, that sustains the life of men⁵ and their "metabolism" with nature. As she remarks, "It is indeed the mark of all laboring that it leaves nothing behind, that the result of its effort is as quickly consumed as the effort is spent. And yet this effort, despite its futility, is born of a great urgency and motivated by a more powerful drive than anything else, because life depends on it."⁶ Life is dependant on the "products" of labor. However, these "products" are ephemeral, consumed almost as soon as they are produced. Such "products" cannot become a part of the lasting edifice that is the human world, though they are necessarily a part of it. Labor, then, is a process that is unceasing so long as life remains on earth. A good example of labor is the cultivation of farmland for the production of food. The process is unending and the useful product, the crop, is quickly consumed to sustain the life and well-being of an individual or community. The process is then repeated virtually *ad infinitum*.

Work, the activity of *homo faber*, on the other hand, corresponds to the process that seeks to create something that endures. It is the activity that seeks the creation of products that remain within the world of men for an extended, if not permanent, period of time. The construction of a building, for instance, is a good example of this. A building is created, but it remains (it is not consumed in the same sense as food) and there is no need to engage in the

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construction of new buildings to replace one just created as it will endure for some time. Work, as a result of the permanence of its products, does not share the urgency that comes with labor. Though work creates the durable world that is a necessary part of the human condition, it does not share the aspect of labor that constantly urges the *animal laborans* to produce. What urges one to work is not the immediate necessity of the product of *homo faber* in the biological sense, but the need to produce in order to attain the means, indirectly, to subsist: "...[work] is repeated for reasons outside itself and is unlike the compulsory repetition inherent in laboring, where one must eat in order to labor and must labor in order to eat...To have a definite beginning and a definite, predictable end is the mark of fabrication, which through this characteristic alone distinguishes it from all other human activities."⁷ Work, we can see, is not a process, but an endeavor like none other in the human condition, one which has a marked beginning and end. Work, aside from its creation of something permanent, allows for something that labor does not. Work need not produce anything of practical value as does labor. The absence of this restriction classes the artist within *homo faber*, and places art within the purview of work. However, these products take a special position in the world as they cannot be classed with the exchange market as other items can because art objects are unique. In short, the enduring character of the products of work makes work the productive trait that corresponds to worldliness—worldliness being the lasting artifice created by humans within, and of, nature.

The final phenomenon of the trinity of the *vita active* is action itself. The basic condition of action for Arendt is that of "human plurality." Arendt stresses that plurality should not be understood in the same sense as multiplicity. Rather, plurality implies the existence of a multitude of beings that are unique: "In man, otherness, which he shares with everything that is, and distinctness,

which he shares with everything alive, become uniqueness, and human plurality is the paradoxical plurality of unique beings.”⁸ Two other properties are associated with the condition of being human according to Arendt: action *per se*, and speech. It is through these two capacities that men are not only unique, but are human: “A life without speech and without action...is literally dead to the world; it has ceased to be human life because it is no longer lived among men.”⁹ The necessary quality of action for being human is not true of labor and work. Labor can be circumvented through the enslavement of others, and work, as we have seen, is not necessary for the *animal laborans* at all. Men can labor and they can work, but they need not; this is not true of action and speech.

Speech and action are the means by which individuals arrive in the human world, according to Arendt. She likens this arrival to a “second birth.” However, this arrival is not necessary to living (though it is necessary to being human), like labor, but results from one’s own initiative. That is, it is the result of the faculty of action that an individual becomes human. It is only in the public realm, the realm of action and speech, that an individual becomes human. Work and labor do not suffice to make one human as all creatures have their necessary labor, and the products of work may be of no consequence in, they need not enter, the political realm. This is a return to the Aristotelian *zōon politikon*, men *qua* political animal. Yet, not only is it action that gives birth to an individual’s humanity, it is this capacity of humanity that gave rise to freedom as each new human is a new beginning. It is the *sine qua non* of action that it begins something new: “To act, in its most general sense, means to take an initiative, to begin...to set something into motion.”¹⁰ This capacity for action, this freedom, is, as we can see, political/social in nature. The public realm is not only the site of action and freedom for Arendt, but of humanity as well.

In Arendt’s concept of action we see a major departure from Heidegger. As we have seen, for Heidegger, human existence is

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revealed in history; that is, the past informs the future as history unfolds. In this way *Dasein* are “shepherds” and protectors of Being as Heidegger liked to call them. They hold a special place in the movement of history in that they are beings that are concerned with the ontological question, but this is not the same as being active in the sense Arendt puts forth. The only thing like initiative that may exist within Heidegger’s philosophy is in “releasement”, the letting go to, or embracing of, the destining of Being (Arendt called this Heidegger’s “Will-not-to-will”¹¹). Moreover, as regards this split from Heidegger, who connected thought and action as synonymous forms of reveling brought forth by Being through human action, Arendt entirely divorces thought and action. What is initially unsettling about Heidegger (the absence of human agency and thus culpability for his dealings and the state of the world) is ostensibly remedied in Arendt who once again places action within the human purview—in fact, as we have seen, she asserts it is the attribute that gives humanity to individuals. However, the freedom humans have in action is only to begin something new. Individuals cannot predict or design what the ultimate outcome of their actions will be. As a result of this, thinking, in the sense of forethought, is not possible.

As is made clear in Arendt’s *The life of the Mind*, thinking and willing are two separate faculties. The result of this is that thinking has no power to inform action. It is the faculty of will that informs action. Action, moreover, is social and political in nature. And Arendt takes up this aspect of the political when she approaches the question of freedom. She addresses the question of freedom in two ways in *Willing*, the second volume of *The Life of the Mind*. Firstly, she sketches a rough history of the concept of Will. In so doing she establishes how this faculty has evolved conceptually. Secondly, she approaches it by exploring the activities not of thinkers, but of men of action who sought to begin something new in founding a new government. These individuals were those

involved in the creation of new constitutions and governmental systems. The men of action, she asserts, were confronted with the “problem of beginning.”¹² That is to say, they were confounded with the problem of starting something founded upon nothing previous, and as a result was bound to be arbitrary: The problem of beginning is “a problem because beginning’s very nature is to carry in itself an element of complete arbitrariness.”¹³ However, Arendt comes to the conclusion that these political systems were not arbitrary and their foundations were based on ancient political systems and foundation myths. This fact is endemic of the whole process of the “thinking ego” which is constantly “recoiling” upon itself.¹⁴ This is the plague of the professional thinker who must seek to consider the problem of existing, but can only do so within the limited domain of thought, which Arendt conceives as the conversation between “me and myself.” The limitation of the self is then the stumbling block of thought. Yet, what is also gathered from the response to the problem of foundation is that men of action, seeking to start something unprecedented after being liberated from an undesirable political system, can only approach the problem by looking to historical sources. It seems, then, that where professional thinkers recoil on the thinking ego, men of action, recoil on history. In other words, where the individual is limited by the self, the human collective is limited by history. They are thrown back upon tradition, and thus recycle the past, as they try to innovate something new. In this interpretation we see something of Heidegger’s influence on Arendt. This is the historicity of Dasein expressed in Arendtian terms. The result of that limitation of men is that freedom and action, conceived as containing an essential aspect of arbitrariness and spontaneity, cannot be the result of thinking or even of founding. Moreover, not only is thought not the source of freedom, but neither is the activity of foundation, that which is the product of purported “men of action.” With no basis in thought or political foundation, Arendt

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suggests that, like Augustine, “natality” is the source of free beginnings: “The very capacity for beginning is rooted in *natality*, and by no means in creativity, not in a gift but in the fact that human beings, new men, again and again appear in the world by virtue of birth.”¹⁵ This rings of Arendt’s insistence in the *Human Condition* that plurality is a key aspect of action. Freedom, then, may be regarded as something that is not the product of individuals, but of the aggregate process of coming into being and passing away, natality and mortality, of individuals who arrive in the world spontaneously and arbitrarily. This freedom is only manifest in the public realm as it requires a paradigm from which to depart in order to show its spontaneity and arbitrariness, as well as giving to individuals the realm in which they can assert themselves as individuals. Natality gives freedom to individuals, and humanity, in that it constantly brings new individuals in from outside the existing tradition. By their advent in the world, their perpetual entrance into and passing out of the human condition, individuals are free.

Freedom in this sense, though a result of individuality/plurality, is not a result of thought or will but of the spontaneity inherent in the natality of individual humans who bring with them something new at birth—if only it is contributed to the public realm through speech and action. This is freedom for Arendt. It is the product of human mortality, but even more of its fecundity. Though freedom, in the Arendtian sense, is not at our command, humans are free to the extent that they begin something new through their birth—and more so at that “second birth” that occurs when men enter into the public realm through speech and action where they become human. To be truly human is to be free, and also to be active in the public and political realm.

In the Arendtian sense, where freedom is manifest in *natality* and public engagement, there is a prescription for human activity—something that could never come from Heidegger’s philosophy

since the best we could hope for is to accept the boundaries that our historical situatedness entail. However, for Arendt, although we may be given a world that endures from the work of previous generations, the very existence of individual humans, their coming into the world, is a new and unprecedented event. Yet, this novel event can only be fully realized where men enter into the public realm. For Heidegger, in the unfolding of history, man's destining, brings action to men in the thrownness of human existence; that is to say, the sending of Being informs man. For Arendt, at birth men emerge as a new beginning; in public they act, and manifest as human. In her conception men, and not Being, are the bringers of action and new beginnings.

¹ Martin Heidegger. Basic writings. ed. David Farrell Krell. San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1977. 48.

² *ibid.* 63.

³ *ibid.* 65.

⁴ *ibid.* 217.

⁵ Arendt repeatedly insists that "men, not man, inhabit the earth" and so I take up her language by using "men" to suggest the "plurality" of unique individuals rather than "man" which suggests a multitude of like individuals.

⁶ Arendt, Hannah. The Human Condition. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1958. 87.

⁷ *ibid.* 143.

⁸ *ibid.* 176.

⁹ *ibid.* 176.

¹⁰ *ibid.* 177.

¹¹ Arendt, Hannah. The Life of The Mind/Willing. San Diego: Harcourt, 1971. 172.

¹² *ibid.* 206.

¹³ *ibid.* 207.

¹⁴ *ibid.* 216.

¹⁵ *ibid.* 217.