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## **ARENDT AND HEIDEGGER: THE HUMAN CONDITION RECONSIDERED**

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**Abstract.** Heidegger's name is often brought up in connection to Arendt's *The Human Condition* (1958), since his thought had a pervasive influence on Arendt's work. Although Heidegger is not mentioned in *The Human Condition*, Arendt herself claims in her letter that her work "grew right out of the first days in Marburg and so is in all respects indebted to" him. Accordingly, this article is an attempt to search for the roots of Arendt's philosophical views in her magnum opus. Based upon close reading of Heidegger's texts, this article argues that Heidegger's later philosophy has impacted on Arendt's ontology and her understanding of modern society in *The Human Condition*. My plan is as follows: first, to note Arendt's relationship to Western tradition of political philosophy; second, to discuss Arendtian notions of political action and public realm; and third to study her conception of modernity.

**Keywords:** Arendt; Heidegger; politics; philosophy; action; public space; modernity

In a letter to Martin Heidegger dated October 28, 1960, Hannah Arendt wrote,

You will see that the book has no dedication. If things had ever worked out properly between us then I would have asked you if I could have dedicated the book to you. It grew right out of the first days in Marburg and so is in all respects indebted to you. (Ettinger, 1995: 114).

Heidegger's interpretation of Plato and Aristotele in his lecture course on Plato's *The Sophist*, which was given in the winter semester of 1924 – 1925 at the University of Marburg, "...left indelible marks upon Arendt's thinking." (Benhabib, 2003: 117). However, Jacques Taminiaux notes that Arendt's *The Human Condition* is the rebuttal of the Heideggerian reappropriation of the Greeks, as was done in the Marburg era. His argument is as follows:

Heidegger's attitude in 1933, his Platonic-Nazi proclamations at the time of the Rectorate, spurred Arendt to deliberately question the pertinence, the limits, and the blind spots of the teachings that she had received from him. This interrogation led her to perceive that the deconstruction practiced by Heidegger, far from being wholly faithful to the phenomena as he claimed, suffered from the start from a bias consisting

of maintaining the priority of the *bios theoretikos* and pushing this priority to the point that this bios ends by becoming blind to many phenomena and by destroying “in it the plurality of the human condition.” (Taminiaux, 2002: 25 – 26).

Consequently, in order to understand Arendt’s view about Heidegger it is important to explore her criticisms of the tradition of Western political philosophy, especially how “there occurred a shift away from the activities connected with political life, with action and the striving for earthly immortality, in favor of the silent contemplation of eternal truths which a privileged few could enjoy by willfully detaching themselves from all worldly concerns and activities.” (Passerin d’Entrèves, 1994: 42).

### The Inversion of Tradition

In *The Human Condition* Arendt claims that the tradition of Western political philosophy “...grew out of a specific historical constellation: the trial of Socrates and the conflict between the philosopher and *polis*.” (Arendt, 1958: 12). This thought finds its fullest articulation in Arendt’s lecture “Philosophy and Politics” which she gave at Notre Dame University in 1954. In this lecture, which deals with the “gulf between philosophy and politics,” Arendt explicitly states that

Our tradition of political thought began when the death of Socrates made Plato despair of polis life and, at the same time, doubt certain fundamentals of Socrates’ teachings. The fact that Socrates had not been able to persuade his judges of his innocence and his merits... made Plato doubt the validity of persuasion. (Arendt, 2004: 427).

According to Taminiaux, there is a link between Arendt’s treatment of Plato in her lecture of 1954 and Heidegger’s interpretation of Plato in 1924 – 1925. As he writes:

From the very start, Arendt’s lecture focuses on the conclusion that Plato drew from Socrates’ trial; i.e. that there is an opposition between truth and opinion (*doxa*). Heidegger’s lecture course also focuses on the same opposition from the start. But whereas Arendt insists that the opposition was ‘the most anti-Socratic conclusion’ that Plato ever drew, Heidegger takes for granted that, by insisting on the opposition, Plato was in full agreement with Socrates. (Taminiaux, 2007: 25).

In the same context, Taminiaux clearly demonstrates that unlike Heidegger, who thinks that Plato’s doctrine of truth, as it is framed in the simile of the cave, justifies the political rule of philosophers, Arendt deconstructs the simile “in order to comprehend the enormity of Plato’s demand that the philosopher should become the ruler of the City.” (Ibid., 26). Thus, Taminiaux argues, Arendt’s deconstruction of Plato is carried out from the viewpoint of *praxis* and from the perspective of the *bios politikos*.

Compared with Arendt, Heidegger’s existential interpretation of Plato is focused on “the excellence of the *bios theoretikos*.” In the lecture course of 1924 – 1925, on Plato’s *The Sophist*, Heidegger, inspired by Plato’s teaching, claimed that “only the

philosopher can be an authentic politician.” (Ibid., 11). This account can be found in Heidegger’s lecture of 1932 – 1933, *On the Essence of Truth*, where he states:

Control and organization of the state is to be undertaken by philosophers, who set standards and rules in accordance with their widest and deepest freely inquiring knowledge, thus determining the general course which society should follow. As philosophers they must be in a position to know clearly and rigorously what man is, and how things stand with respect to his being and ability-to-be. (Heidegger, 2002: 73).

Moreover, Heidegger’s appeal to *theoria* in the Rectoral Address is a good example of this appropriation of Platonic philosophy. In the Rectoral Address of 1933, Heidegger asks what *theoria* meant for the Greeks. “Theory,” in Heidegger’s words,

is not pursued for its own sake, but only in the passion to remain close to and hard pressed by what is as such. But, for another, the Greeks struggled precisely to conceive and to enact this contemplative questioning as one, indeed as the highest mode of ἐνέργεια, of man’s “being-at-work.” They were not concerned to assimilate practice to theory; quite the reverse: theory was to be understood as itself the highest realization of genuine practice. (Heidegger, 2003b: 4).

Regarding Heidegger’s discourse in the Rectoral Address, Taminiaux writes that it is a celebration of the *bios theoretikos* of what Plato called *theoria*, contemplation. Heidegger, however, rejects “...the traditional assumption that *theoria* referred to pure contemplation enjoyed and valued for its own sake, and arguing that *theoria* was literally a way of living and being for Dasein.” (Ralkowski, 2009: 118). Or to put it in other words, *theoria*, according to Heidegger, is conceived in existential terms as a way of life.

In his later writings Heidegger’s view changes, for he deconstructs the contemplative metaphysical tradition inaugurated by Plato. In “Plato’s Doctrine of Truth,” Heidegger holds that “Since Plato thinking about being of beings has become – ‘philosophy,’ because it is a matter of gazing up at the ‘ideas.’ But the ‘philosophy’ that begins with Plato has, that point on, the distinguishing mark of what is later called “metaphysics.” (Heidegger, 1998: 180). Heidegger argues in “Letter on Humanism” that metaphysics “thinks Being of beings. But it does not think the difference of both. Metaphysics does not ask about the truth of Being itself.” (Heidegger, 1997: 227). In spite of Heidegger’s claim to have overcome the Western metaphysical tradition Arendt writes in her “What Is Existenz Philosophy?” that Heidegger tries to provide a new foundation for metaphysics. Likewise, in a lecture first given in 1954, she illustrates Heidegger’s dependence on traditional metaphysics<sup>1</sup>. Nonetheless, Arendt adopts the Heideggerian strategy of deconstruction of metaphysics. And in *Life of the Mind*, she declares that “I have clearly joined the ranks of those who for some time now have been attempting to dismantle metaphysics, and philosophy with all its categories, as we have known them from their beginning in Greece until today.”<sup>2</sup>) As Barbara Cassin has shown,

“In referring to the attempt to dismantle metaphysics, she is in effect calling herself a Heideggerian...” (Cassin, 1990: 31).

We have to note that Arendt’s analysis of the relationship between philosophy and politics led her to the claim in *The Human Condition* that most of the tradition of Western political philosophy from Plato onward relegated political experience. Despite her criticisms of Platonic tradition, Arendt returns to ancient Greece in order to “theorize genuine political action as an activity capable of restoring luster to a world made unimaginably ugly.” (Villa, 1999b: 218).

### **The Return to the Greeks: Political Action and Public Space**

Arendt’s philosophical thought is inspired by the ancient Greek polis of Athens and her “...*The Human Condition* is ultimately the quest to reconstruct the political experience of ancient citizens which had been obscured and overgrown by a political tradition.” (Hinchman & Hinchman, 1994: 199). Namely, Arendt turns her attention to an active life that is typically ignored by political tradition. For Arendt, in this respect, the most important categories of active life are action and speech. In *The Human Condition* she writes:

Of all the activities necessary and present in human communities, only two were deemed to be political and to constitute what Aristotle called the *bios politikos*, namely action (praxis) and speech (lexis) out of which rises the realm of human affairs (*ta tōn anthrōpōn pragmata*, as Plato use to call it) from which everything merely necessary or useful is strictly excluded. (Arendt, 1958: 24 – 25).

From Arendt’s point of view, in acting and speaking men reveal their unique personal identities and thus make their appearance in the public space. As Arendt notes, the public space “means, first, everything that appears in the public can be seen and heard by everybody and has the widest possible publicity.” (Arendt, 1958: 50). Furthermore, the public space, according to Arendt, “signifies the world itself in so far as it is a common to all of us and distinguish from our privately owned place in it.” (Ibid., 52). In Heideggerian vein, she argues that the world is not identical with earth or with nature. It is related, rather, to the human artifacts, as well as to human affairs which go on in the man-made world. In Heidegger’s *Being and Time*, “The world is the totality of those contexts of involvement with the things and affairs around one; it is the *Um-welt* (literally, “the world around one”). (Benhabib, 2003: 52). As Heidegger tries to show, “the world is always the one that I share with Others. The world of *Dasein* is a with-world [*Mitwelt*]. Being-in is Being-with Others.” (Heidegger, 2001:155). But for Heidegger, forms of *Mitsein* represent the fallenness of *Dasein* into the everyday world of the anonymous *das Man*.

It is important to note that, according to Heidegger, the most authentic form for *Dasein* is not *Mitsein* but being-towards-death. As Karl Löwith says in his essay on Heidegger: “Death in *Sein und Zeit* is *Dasein*’s end which is to be brought into existence as part of each one’s own Being-in-the-world and ‘Being-towards-death’

such that it is a possibility of authentic existence.” (Löwith. 1973: 40). Concerning this point, Arendt writes:

Dasein could be truly itself only if it could pull back from its being in-the-world into itself, but that is what its nature can never permit it to do, and that is why, by its very nature, it is always a falling away from itself. “Dasein is always at a remove from itself as genuine being able-to-be-Self; it has fallen into the “world.” “Only at death, which will take him out of the world, does man have the certainty of being himself.” (Arendt, 1994: 179).

And Arendt further claims that

In the framework of Heidegger’s philosophy man comes to his “fall” as follows: As being-in-the-world, man has not made himself but is “thrown” (geworfen) into this his being. He attempts to escape this thrown-into-ness (Geworfenheit) by means of a “projection” (Entwurf) in anticipation of death as his utmost possibility. (Ibid., 180).

Contrary to Heidegger, Arendt contends that if we lose the public space, we will lose our being as selves. Nevertheless, she argues that Heidegger’s philosophy tries to preserve human dignity and selfhood. Heidegger, in Arendt’s view, “gave us a new language in which to illuminate the uniqueness of individual *Existenz* and warned against thoughtless reification of human spirit in the speech and technology of our time.” (Hinchman & Hinchman, 1994: 203) It is at this point that Arendt turns to Heidegger whose “...diagnosis of pathologies of the modern age provided Arendt with the frame for her own critique of modernity in *The Human Condition*.” (Villa, 1999a: 77).

### **The Critique of Modernity**

Arendt’s conception of modernity is deeply grounded in Heidegger’s thought. For Heidegger, the distinguishing mark of modern age is anthropocentrism. As he formulates this insight in the 1940 course on *Nietzsche*: “... that period we call the modern... is defined by the fact that man becomes the measure and the center of beings.” (Heidegger, 1991: 28). Above all, it means that the man becomes *subiectum*. Heidegger consequently asks, “How do we arrive at an emphatic position of the subject?” (Ibid., 96). His answer: “Since Descartes and through Descartes, man, the human ‘I,’ has in a preeminent way come to be the ‘subject’ in metaphysics.” (Ibid., 96). This has led Heidegger to say that modern metaphysics is anthropomorphism, that is, the formation and apprehension of the world according to man’s image.

For Heidegger, all metaphysics, not just modern metaphysics, is built on the standard-giving role of man within beings as a whole. Heidegger’s point is that, strictly speaking, metaphysics is a fate which “...lets mankind be suspended in the middle of beings as a fundamental trait of Western European history, without the Being of beings ever being able to be experienced and questioned and structured in its truth as the *twofoldness* of both in term of metaphysics and through metaphysics.” (Heidegger, 2003a: 90). Thus, Heidegger concludes, the Being of beings remains

concealed. It is for this reason that Heidegger claims that homelessness is coming to be the destiny of the world. He also holds that what Marx recognized as the alienation of man has its roots in the homelessness of modern man. According to William Richardson, "...when we are told that Marxism humanism experiences the alienation (*Etfremdung*) this is but an ulterior form of Nietzschean nihilism, sc. The forgottenness of Being" (Richardson, 2003: 389). However, "Arendt's quarrel with modernity," as Danna Villa rigidly argues, "is not that it deepens *Seinsvergessenheit* (forgetfulness of Being), but that its energies and outlook withdraw humanity from a worldly existence." (Villa, 1996: 199). In *The Human Condition* Arendt states that there are three great events that impact the modern age and contribute to world alienation:

the discovery of America and the ensuing exploration of the whole earth; the Reformation, which by expropriating ecclesiastical and monastic possessions started twofold process of individual expropriation and the accumulation of social wealth; the invention of telescope and the development of a new science that considers the nature of the earth from the viewpoint of the universe. (Arendt, 1958: 248).

It should be noted that the philosophical response to the invention of the telescope was Cartesian doubt by which modern philosophy was founded. Cartesian philosophy drives humanity inward to introspection and promotes a loss of the common sense that, in Arendt's phrase, "now became an inner faculty without any world relationship." (Ibid., 283). This means, as Arendt explains in *The Human Condition*, that Descartes moves the "Archimedean point" into the mind, causing humans to escape from the world into the self. A consequence of this is that the "worldly objects that formerly stood over against individuals and appeared to all of them were dissolved into sensations experienced by individuals in the privacy of their own minds..." (Canovan, 1995:151). Arendt insists in this regard that, this subjectivization of reality is the most radical form of alienation. As Villa points out:

The "twofold flight from the earth into the universe and from the world into the self" is a reactive move, but it is also the precondition for the "becoming picture of the world" (a fact driven home by Arendt's theme of the "Archimedean point"). And, as with Heidegger, this "becoming picture" is prelude to the conquest of the world by *homo faber*, whom Arendt refers to throughout *The Human Condition* as "lord and master." (Villa, 1996: 192).

Indeed, for Arendt, *homo faber* is the lord and master of the whole earth. And fabrication, the work of *homo faber*, begins with an act of violence, by destroying some aspect of nature in order to make objects for use. According to Arendt's analysis "...the utility standard inherent in very activity of fabrication is that the relationship between means and end on which it relies is very much like a chain whose every end can serve again as means in some other context." (Arendt, 1958: 154). But for Arendt, in modern society - as in a society of "laboring" - "where production consists primarily in preparation for consumption, the very distinction



between means and ends, so highly characteristic of the activities of *homo faber*, simply does not make sense, and the instruments which *homo faber* invented ... therefore lose their instrumental character ..." (Ibid., 145). In contrast to the *homo faber*, "...*animal laborans* does not use tools and instruments in order to build a world but in order to ease the labors of its own life process; it has lived literally in a world of machine..." (Ibid., 146 – 147). Thus, as Arendt points out, in a society of laborers the world of machines has become a substitute for real world. Precisely for this reason, Arendt claims, the activity of the *animal laborans* corresponds to the experience of worldlessness. In this regard, Villa has rightly drawn our attention to the worldlessness "...as a kind of homelessness, a lack of place that results from the modern destruction of the durability of the 'human artifice.'" (Villa, 1996: 171).

Arendt, like Heidegger, holds the opinion that in modern society the *animal rationale* has been replaced by the *animal laborans*. Heidegger writes in "Overcoming Metaphysics": "Collapse and desolation find their adequate occurrence in the fact that metaphysical man, the animal rationale, gets fixed as the laboring animal." (Heidegger, 2003a: 86). Following Ernst Jünger, Heidegger claims that the labor is now reaching the metaphysical rank of the unconditional objectification of everything present. In his later essay entitled "The Question of Being" Heidegger underlines this crucial point. He explains that the power which is stamping everything, is Gestalt as the Gestalt of a humanity: "the Gestalt of the worker." From Jünger's perspective, as Zimmerman suggests, the "new kind of humanity was compelled by the Gestalt of the worker to produce ever more powerful technological device in the service of planetary domination." (Zimmerman, 1990:57). It is noteworthy that Heidegger rejects Jünger's idea that humans have domination over the earth. To remedy this, Heidegger's own position asserts that "humanity should view itself as a serving the presencing the entities, not as dominating them." (Ibid., 112). Heidegger relies on Hölderlin's poetry which can "open the way beyond the era of technological nihilism by defining *techne* not as nonstop industrial production but instead as appropriate disclosure of the being of entities." (Ibid., 112).

In the lecture course of 1939 – 1940 on *Art and Technology* Heidegger defines art as the counterforce of technology: "If technology is the destroying power, one that turns man into an object even as he seek to make himself master of objects, then arts stands, in Heidegger's eyes, as 'the saving power'." (Megill, 1987: 143). As Heidegger explains in his 1950 essay "The Origin of the Work of Art," the work of art opens up in its own way the Being of beings. In particular, it assumes that the work of art is able to bring forth the truth of these beings.

In her part, Arendt argues that the work of art is the most intensely worldly of all tangible things; its durability is almost untouched by the natural processes, since it is not subject to the use of living creatures. Arendt thus distinguishes three modes of being, such as consumable objects (which, for her, are the most natural of

all things), use objects, and works of art. Here again, Heidegger's influence is felt. There are passages in Heidegger's writings which seem to imply these very same distinctions. For instance, as Meyer Schapiro says, in his essay on "The Origin of the Work of Art," Heidegger interprets a painting by van Gogh to illustrate the nature of the work of art. And he "comes to this picture in the course of distinguishing three modes of being: of useful artifacts, of natural things, and of works of fine art." (Schapiro, 1994: 135). For Heidegger, like for Arendt, every mode of being corresponds to a particular mode of experiencing. What became clear, therefore, is that these modes of being are the forms of expressions of the existence of man.

Arendt also note that immediate source of the art of work is the human capacity for thinking. Arendt, like Heidegger before her, points out that thinking and cognition are not the same. Especially significant in this regard is Arendt's essay "Heidegger at Eighty" in which she characterizes Heidegger as a thinker to whom "thinking, which rises out of the simple fact of being-in-the-world and now 'thinks recallingly and responsively the meaning that reigns in everything that is,' can no more have final goal – cognition and knowledge – that can life itself." (Arendt, 1978b: 297). Such statement allows Arendt to maintain that "thinking has come to life again; the cultural treasures of the past, believed to be dead, are being made to speak..." (Ibid., 295).

Here, we may say, Arendt embraces the nostalgic side of Heideggerian heritage. "Nostalgia is a central...to the thought of Heidegger and of such followers of Heidegger as Hannah Arendt." (Megill, 1987: 77). It is well known that, after the Turn (Kehre) Heidegger was much inspired by Presocratics. Particularly, he "seized upon the notion that pre-Socratic Greek poets and thinkers possessed a far purer understanding of being than any other people." (Hinchman & Hinchman, 1994: 194). At the same time, the past which is made to speak in Arendt's writings is that of Homer and the Athens of Pericles: "Arendt lamented, in an antiquarian-Homeric spirit, the loss in the modern world of 'the shining glory of immortal fame which may follow the great deed.' Like her mentor from Messkirch, she suffered profoundly from 'polis envy' - a tendency to view modern political life as a precipitous fall from the glories of a highly mythologized Periclean heyday." (Wolin, 2001: 69). Thus Arendt, who was a former student of Heidegger, is the philosopher of nostalgia and antimodernist theorist of the polis and of the praxis.

## NOTES

1. See, Hannah Arendt, "Concern with Politics in Recent European Philosophical Thought," in *Essays in Understanding* (1934 – 54), New-York: Harcourt Brace, 1994, 432 – 433.
2. Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, 212 Cf. this issue Hannah Arendt, "Heidegger at Eighty," 297.



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