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Work and The Human Condition

Position Paper

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### Work and The Human Condition

In order to answer the question of the place work has in the human condition, it is important to consider the context that it is being asked because of the impact that it will have on the answer. If this question were being asked with work being thought of in the Arendtian sense of the word, the question would focus on how the human condition is affected by the created world. If this question is being asked with work being thought of as the activity that one engages in to earn their living, it will be an entirely different answer. However, this dichotomy does not fully address the scope of issues that are present in the question.

When considering this question from an Arendtian viewpoint, the answer becomes focused on how the created world affects the human condition. Conversely, the answer to this question is greatly varies according to the person that is answering. There are several different approaches that can be taken to this question. Although there are differences in these approaches, they will all be focused on one fact, that people can create an environment that is separate from the natural world and this created world can have a significant impact on the people living in it. This, perhaps, is the quality of the created world that has the most visible impact on people, the ability to create a space that can shelter its inhabitants from the elements of the outside world. Arendt addresses this issue in The Human Condition. "Things and men form the environment for each of man's activities, which would be pointless without such; yet this environment, the world into which we are born, would not exist without

the human activity which produced it, as in the case of fabricated things; which takes care of it, as in the case of cultivated land; or which established it through organization.” (Arendt 22) At the most primitive, this is a space where a person can come out of the weather. Human beings have lived in enclosures for so long it has become one of the basic elements of human existence. There has been a structure created for almost every human activity imaginable. It is this world that the social has created that also plays a part in how work affects the human condition.

Another aspect of the Arendtian sense of the word work is the world that we create for ourselves in these structures. I should clarify that the usage of the word work has some overlap with the concept of action. However, it is my belief that action is not always possible because action must happen between equals. In this created world of the social, people are not always equals. It is a disturbing aspect of this created world that there are people who have been declared to be less than equal because of one of their defining characteristics. The categorization of people by biological differences has led to social constructions such as racism, sexism and myriad of other concepts that only serve to perpetuate the idea that there some people are more equal than others. Although these social constructions are not tangible in the same way that a structure is, this does not make the impact that they have had on people any less damaging. It has had an effect on where they live, whom they are allowed to marry, the method that they chose to educate their children and the manner in which that they can provide for their family. It is this context of how work impacts the human condition that might be the most commonly associated perception of the question. How does one’s employment affect their existence?

In American society, one’s employment is a major aspect of their identity. It is not uncommon to hear some introduce themselves by their name and their occupation. This introduction has become a widely accepted practice in sharing personal information with a new person. The reason for this, in my humble opinion, is because there is far more being disclosed than what a person does for a living. This is a method of communicating morals and values. There is far more information being disclosed in

these discussions than just what a person's occupation is. When a person discloses what their occupation is, they are also disclosing their motivation for doing this job. There are those who work to pursue their dreams, there are those who work to pursue a paycheck and then there are those lucky enough to be able to combine the two. In an ideal world, this would be more of a commonality than an anomaly.

It could be argued that one of the factors that contribute to a worker being dissatisfied with their job is the feeling that their employer has no real consideration or respect for them, that they are nothing more than a machine. Marx speaks to these issues in his writings. "The worker becomes poorer the more wealth he produces, the more his production increases in power and extent. The worker becomes a cheaper commodity the more commodities he produces. The *increase in value* of the world of things is directly proportional to the *decrease in value* of the human world. Labor not only produces commodities. It also produces itself and the worker as a *commodity*, and indeed in the same proportion as it produces commodities in general. (Marx 59) There is no pride involved in knowing that you are considered to be nothing more than a commodity.

Another aspect of employment that has an impact on the human condition is the opportunities that a person feels are open to them. Consider this example, what opportunities would a person of color from the South feel that they had? It is my opinion that they would not believe that the same opportunities as a white person existed for them. This belief is a result of the lived experiences of people of color in the South. Various forms of media, systems of government and the society that they live in have perpetuated it. My personal opinion is that this system of thought is a result of the culture that existed in the South that not only condoned slavery but also built a financial structure on it. When people have been blatantly treated as commodities for so long, it becomes ingrained into the group consciousness, which in turn impacts how the human condition is experienced on the individual level.

When I began to write this paper and ponder the impact that work has on the human condition, I found that my answer to that question varied according to the context that the question was asked in

and how I was defining work. When I thought of work in the Arendtian sense, I focused on how the created world affected the human condition. This led me on a line of reasoning that focused heavily on how the social can impact the human condition that the individual experiences. One of the more troubling realizations that came with this was the knowledge that what I was thinking of was action. However, I could not describe it as such because equality does not exist for all in this society. It was thinking that led me to consider how employment affects the human condition. In a world where so much of a person's identity and self worth is connected to their job and ability to earn a living, it is not hard to see the detrimental impact of generational poverty has on people. Once a people have had it ingrained in their group consciousness that they are a commodity and nothing more, it will take significant social change to change that. This is just one example of how work impacts the human condition.

I feel that this question "What is the place of work within human condition today?" is a question that doesn't have a definitive answer because there are so many factors that impact the answer. For some, the place of work might be how they sustain themselves. For others, it might be the activities that they engage because of a commitment to their goals and values. Personally, I feel that the place of work in the human condition is a malleable idea that is subject to change on a day-to-day basis. I hope to be able to use my work, my created existence to improve my human condition and this is the place that work has in my human condition.

## Bibliography

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