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Work and the Human Condition

Position Paper

"Whatever touches or enters into a sustained relationship with human life immediately assumes the character of a condition of human existence." (pg. 9) The Human Condition, by Hannah Arendt, explains that gaining awareness of anything, reconstructs humanity's perception of its own existence. Arendt adds that it is impossible to define the natural essence of all that surrounds us (pg. 10), so by Arendt's explanation, humanity will never obtain a complete understanding of its own existence. This discovery defines limits on human understanding that can make one feel quite vulnerable. If our existence is perceived through the observation of our environment, which we can never adequately or conclusively comprehend, how can one man or woman be expected to achieve a sense of identity? The answer can be different for anyone, but the focus of individual identity comes from progress and appreciation through work.

Daniel T. Rodgers wrote extensively on the relationship between man and work in Work Ethic in Industrial America 1850-1920. "Work cleared away doubts and vanquished despair; it curbed the animal instincts to violence, it distracted the laborer from the siren call of radicalism." Theorists during the industrial revolution understood the need for working jobs in society, Emerson wrote, "Labor: a man coins himself through labor; turns his day, his strength, his thoughts, his affection into some product which remains a visible sign of his power." While these ideas were well attuned to

modern opinions of work, the second half of the nineteenth century changed work for the worse, a change have not shed the effects of still today. Expediency based inventions replaced quality artisans, "Aggressive subdivision of labor, mechanization, and factory building quickly followed." (pg. 23) Industrialization destroyed skills but offered an extreme increase in output which owners chose without question. Laborers became trapped in circumstance, dependent on their semi-skilled position which made them inescapably expendable. Employees became segments of assembly lines, losing all connection with the product of their creation. These factories set the foundation for modern wage earning, which was described at the time, "Wage working violated the canons of a free society; it was inefficient; it was divisive and potentially disastrous." The worker was no longer in control of his own effort. He did not rise with victory or fall with defeat, the worker simply pushed hours and was paid just as mechanically.

This has led to the dangerous state of work in the human condition today. Thoreau says, The millions are awake enough for physical labour; but only one in a million is awake enough for effective intellectual life. To be awake is to be alive. I have never yet met a man who was quite awake." Thoreau's observation is depressing, but impossible to ignore. Anyone can see the blank expression of exhausted men, women, and children trying to keep pace with the bustle of human civilization. Pushing themselves to their physical limit, most people manage to just "get by" without increasing awareness or pleasure or whatever makes separates them from each other.

This circumstance can be harmful, in at least two instances in our studies it became fatal. Watching death of a salesmen, I saw a man not much different from any other making human decisions with the opportunities life offered him. Willy's ultimate

goal throughout the movie is recognition for almost four decades of work. Recognition from his boss, his sons, or his friends, he has built his entire identity in his around his work because it is the only place he could impress himself unto the material world. Willy is similar in many ways to Melville's Ahab of Moby Dick, the whale for Willy is simply being liked. Ahab, like Willy, has been at sea for four decades and bears a personal burden which he cannot articulate,

"What is it, what nameless, inscrutable, unearthly thing is it; what cozening, hidden lord and master, and cruel, remorseless emperor commands me; that against all natural lovings and longings, I so keep pushing, and crowding, and jamming myself on all the time; recklessly making me ready to do what in my own proper, natural heart, I durst not so much dare? Is Ahab, Ahab? Is it I, God, or who, that lifts this arm?" (pg. 592)

The confusion of this unshakably dominating character shows the vulnerability mentioned in the introductory paragraph. Ahab has been looking for sense in the universe for forty years, but still has no sense of identity or purpose except to kill a wild animal. Despite everything he knows he wants and can have, he cannot abandon, he is compelled by what he thinks may be divine intervention. Willy and Ahab are products of a mechanized existence, men who have spent their entire lives in their work find nothing but a more fatigued version of their previous selves and descend into mania.

Arendt explained Human activity in terms of 3 specific realms: Labor, Work, and Action. However, she also explains that Socrates and Aristotle achieved what they called a Eternity, a realm above Action and therefore unreachable by the polis. Arendt also mentions that it is each humans dream to reach immortality through deeds. I

believe that both of these are connected and ultimately explain humanity's obsession with identity. First of all, everyone knows they cannot become immortal, and immortal deeds are only memories and stories that occur after we pass of way and therefore cannot effect or biological lives. Life intrinsically begins and ends, giving it limits. Humanity is conditioned by this limitation just like Arendt says, this limitation consumes us, frightens us, so humanity desires immortality (limitlessness). It is this limitlessness that eternity defines, and I believe that all of us are capable of reaching it. According to the philosopher's, eternity is found through individual practice, exactly like work. It differs from work in that no thought or activity is allowed in Eternity, but I believe that is only specific to a philosopher's perception of Eternity. "[Work] is performed under the guidance of a model which is held by the mind's eye or a blueprint." (pg. 140) In carpentry, metal working, writing, martial arts, work is used in materializing new concepts, which may or may not be founded in reality but become real just the same. The limitlessness of our minds and talents represent the eternity of which the philosopher's spoke. Each human has the capability of tapping into this eternity through work.

Most jobs one finds today leave no room for eternity. Time clocks and assembly lines minimize creativity and arrest inspiration. When the focus is quantity humans no longer work but are implemented for a higher profit, and are easily expendable. The human condition yearns for variation and knowledge, the chance to push limits and expand horizons. It is crucial for one to create an identity based on the ability to overcome, with which mechanization and repetition are entirely counter productive. If one's work is constantly limited and predetermined their own perception of life will be

conditioned as limited and predetermined, this is the essence of the human condition,