

Arendt on Labor and Work

Work and the Human Condition: Winter 2009

I. Review of the Distinction

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Labor, Work and Action

Three fundamental activities

Each corresponds to a fundamental given condition of human life on Earth.

Activity

Labor

Work

Action

All Three Together

Condition

Biological Life

Worldiness

Unnaturalness

Artifice — the Made
World

Plurality

Nativity and Mortality

“Correspond” (co-respond)

(1) A response to (intelligent reaction; effect)

(2) A shaping of (cause)

“Given” Conditions — Yet Shaped

Labor and Work: Issues for Arendt

The distinction between labor and work has been overlooked in most political and economic thought.

This fact raises the following questions, which Arendt needs to answer:

1. What reason is there to think that there is even a distinction between “labor” and “work” at all?
2. Assuming there is a distinction, why did so many great thinkers miss it?
3. What difference does the distinction make?


Why think there is a distinction?

Argument:

1. Every European language has distinct words for the two activities and retains both words even though they are used synonymously.
2. [The best explanation for this fact is that there is a real difference between the activity denoted by “labor” (“arbeiten,” “travailler”...) and that denoted by “work” (“werken,” “ouvrer”).]
3. Therefore, there is a real difference between labor and work.

Inference to the Best Explanation

Theory: There is a difference between labor and work.

explains


Observation: Every European language has distinct words for labor and work.

Another Argument for the Distinction

Arendt, pp. 101-2.


Formally:

1. If work and labor are equivalent, then labor and work have the same properties.
2. If labor and work have the same properties, then [as Veblen says] the lasting evidence of labor is an article of consumption.
3. An article of consumption is not lasting evidence of labor [because articles of consumption aren't lasting at all].
4. Therefore, work and labor are not equivalent.

Why has the distinction been overlooked?

Ancients:

Theory: The ancients held in contempt any activity “undertaken ... in order to provide for the necessities of life” (83).

explains


Observation: The ancients did not distinguish between labor and work.

Moderns:

The moderns did not distinguish work from labor. Instead, they distinguished:

- Productive from unproductive labor
- Skilled from unskilled labor
- Intellectual from manual labor

Why?

Two Passages from Arendt:

First Passage:

“The modern age in general and Karl Marx in particular, overwhelmed, as it were, by the unprecedented actual productivity of Western mankind, had an almost irresistible tendency to look upon all labor as work and to speak of the *animal laborans* in terms much more fitting for *homo faber*, hoping all the time that only one more step was needed to eliminate labor and necessity altogether” (87).

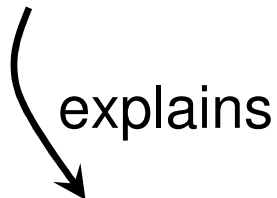
Second passage:

“...the question arises why Locke and all his successors ... clung so obstinately to labor as the origin of property, of wealth, of all values, and, finally, of the very humanity of man.... Historically, political theorists from the seventeenth century onward were confronted with a hitherto unheard-of process of growing wealth, growing property, growing acquisition. In the attempt to account for this steady growth, their attention was naturally drawn to the phenomenon of a progressing process itself.... From its beginning, this process, because of its apparent endlessness, was understood as a natural process and more specifically in the image of the life process itself.... Of all human activities, only labor, and neither action nor work, is unending, progressing automatically in accordance with life itself...” (105-6).

So Why *Did* They Miss The Distinction?

The explanatory structure:

The moderns were impressed by the apparently endless process of growth in wealth. This process has the same unending structure as labor has.



The moderns understood labor as the source of all property and wealth [and conflated work with labor].

IV. And *Why* Is This Important, Again?

“... the distinction between labor and work, which our theorists have so obstinately neglected and our languages so stubbornly preserved, indeed becomes merely a difference in degree if the worldly character of the produced thing ... is not taken into account” (94).

Labor vs. Work, Natural vs. Worldly

<u>Labor</u>	<u>Work</u>
cyclical: no beginning or end	linear: a beginning and end
biological	artificial
produces <i>consumer goods</i>	makes <i>use objects</i> , artifacts
focuses on the subjective – exertion, “happiness”	focuses on the objective – the world

<u>Natural Life</u>	<u>Worldly Life</u>
cyclical: birth & death, growth and decay repeat	linear: An individual is born, lives, then dies. The end.
Labor & consumption are two sides of same cycle.	Artifacts endure and are used until worn out.
Work is destructive – it violently disrupts the natural processes.	Consumption is destructive – it destroys artifacts.
The world destroys and disrupts nature.	Nature constantly invades and erodes the world; people must labor to preserve the world.

When labor and work are conflated, then the distinction between natural life and worldly life is also undermined.

See Arendt, p. 89: “Within a completely ‘socialized mankind’...”

V. Work Today: Not In A Good Way

How Work Should Be:

- Linear: Idea – Making – Completion
- Solitary: One individual craftsperson
- Uses *tools*
- End: A use object or artifact that endures and adds to the world
- Makes objects that have **worth** as use objects

How Work Is Now:

- Subjected to the division of labor
(≠ specialization of work – see p. 123)
- Done in teams
- “performed in the mode of laboring” (146)
- Done with machines
- Produces products for the market
- Products are conceived primarily as *consumer goods* – commodification
- Products have market value but lose worth

What is the Upshot of This?

When we lose a robust conception of work – and a robust *practice* of work – we lose our sense of a **world** within which we can take **action**.

We are thus thrown back into the activity of labor, which is characterized by an endless cycle of exertion and consumption.

But it's even worse than that: see end of chapter 3:

“The easier that life has become in a consumers’ or laborers’ society, the more difficult it will be to remain aware of the urges of necessity by which it is driven.... The danger is that such a society, dazzled by the brilliance of its growing fertility and caught in the smooth functioning of a never-ending process, would no longer be able to recognize its own futility — the futility of a life which ‘does not fix or realize itself in any permanent subject which endures after [its] labor is past’” (135).

Or in the words of the preface:

“What we are confronted with is the prospect of a society of laborers without labor, that is, without the only activity left to them. Surely, nothing could be worse” (5).

“So, *Doctor*

Arendt, what’s

***your* solution?”**

***“The Human
Condition is only
a diagnosis. I do
not propose a
cure.”***

-- How Arendt Should Respond, If She Could