



Hannah Arendt: A New Concept of Politics

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ABSTRACT: Johana Hannah Cohen Arendt (1906-1975), popularly known as Hannah Arendt, was a seminal political thinker of enormous erudition full of insights and exceptional originality of the twentieth century. In her writings she appreciates the nature and value of politics as no one has done before, brilliantly analyses the evils of modern civilization and lays the foundation of an ideal community based on participatory democracy. She is of the view that man is a public being who necessarily requires public space in all relevant areas of organized life. To her, the main aim of politics is to develop a new culture based on a public way of life. In her view, politics is concerned not only with the maintenance of order but also with action, the development of character, public freedom, dignity and humanity. She regards Politics as means of self-revelation and public happiness, a cultural activity and an 'aesthetic activity'. The plan of the present study is to discuss, analyse and evaluate Arendt's Tripartite scheme of labour, work and action and her unique conception of politics as "the pursuit of beauty". She regards politics as a means of self-revelation public happiness and an aesthetic activity. Her concept of politics, in fact, has been regarded as "the pursuit of beauty."¹

KEYWORDS: - Hannah Arendt, Labour, Work, Action, Aesthetic.

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I. INTRODUCTION

An intellectual, refugee and observer of European and American politics, Hannah Arendt is an acclaimed writer of major philosophical classics such as 'The Origin of Totalitarianism (1951), The Human Condition (1958), The Life of the mind' etc. A brilliant polemicist with an independent critical mind, Hannah Arendt's legacy has been described as a cult. She believes that the tendency of not thinking, willing and judging might weaken our humanness and our ability to participate in the world. In her writings, she appreciates the nature and value of politics as no one had done before, uncovers and articulates the neglected dimensions of political experiences; offers a brilliant analysis of the malaise of the present age, and lays the foundation of a 'new' and authentic' political philosophy.

Arendt's concept of Politics is unique. To her, politics is neither concerned with authority, ruling and power, nor is it the study of authoritative allocation of values" for a society and the study of "the influence and influential. To her, politics is a means of self-revelation, of 'thinking', 'acting' and 'sharing' a common world and common space of appearance.

LIFE SKETCH

Hannah Arendt was born in Hanover, Germany in October, 1906. During childhood, she moved to Königsberg (Prussia) and later to Berlin. The precocious and a voracious reader Arendt continued learning ancient Greek, and writing poetry in her teenage years. She absorbed French and German literature as well as poetry and philosophy. She studied at the universities of Marburg, Frieberg and Heidelberg. She was awarded a doctoral degree in Philosophy at Heidelberg in 1929 entitled "Der Liebesbegriff bei Augustine" (Love and Saint Augustine) under the supervision of Karl Jaspers. She was forced to flee to Paris in 1933 where she worked for the immigration of Jewish refugee children into Palestine. In 1936, she separated from her first husband, Gunther Stern and married Heinrich Bluecher, a professor in 1940. She went to America as an exile from the Nazi Scourge in 1941. After 10 years, she was naturalised as an American Citizen in 1951. The research director of the Conference on Jewish Relations (1944-46); the Chief Editor of Schocken books (1946-48); the Executive Director of Jewish Cultural Reconstruction (1949-52); Arendt taught at the University of Chicago from 1963 to 1967 and thereafter at the New School for Social Research in New York City. She held a number of academic

positions at various universities of America until her death in 1975. Her writings cover diverse topics, but she is best known for her two books-(1) *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951) and (2) *The Human Condition* (1958).

TRIPARTITE SCHEME OF LABOUR, WORK, ACTION

In her most influential work “*The Human Condition*” Hannah Arendt offers her novel idea of (i.) Labour: Humanity as Animal Laborans; (ii.) Work: Humanity as Homo Faber and Action: Humanity as Zoon Politikon.

LABOUR

The term labour is a term of contempt for her because its products are short lived, immediately consumed, fall within the realm of necessity and is private in nature. Arendt refers to humanity as ‘animal laborans’, in this mode. This activity corresponds to the biological process and is commanded by necessity. Labour creates nothing permanent. It is an activity in which man enjoys a solipsistic, herdlike level of consciousness. In labour, man shares with the rest of creation bondage to necessity being concerned simply with the maintenance of life. To her, the mark of all labouring is that “it leaves nothing behind” and that the result of its efforts are consumed as quickly as the effort is spent.² Labour is distinguished by its everlasting character. There is no freedom for man in this sphere. If labour produces objects, it produces them only incidentally as a means to its own reproduction. Strictly speaking, its only product is life itself.³

The products of labour are used up by the life process the moment they are produced and must be continually produced afresh. They derive their significance from their place in the life process. In short, labour do not and cannot create an objective world capable of providing men with a permanent home on earth.⁴ A loaf of bread has no other purpose than to assuage hunger, its existence is entirely one dimensional has no identity and independence of its own, Labour requires little initiative and thought because its basic movements are dictated by the life process. In short, “the labouring mass fails to arrest nature’s course. The labour devours the world, the time devours him.”⁵ This is why, Arendt calls this life purely private and meaningless because there is no freedom for man. She argues that it is precisely the recognition of labour as contrary to freedom. For this reason, she is critical of Marx’s elevation of animal laborans to a position of primacy in his vision of the highest ends of human existence.

WORK

Work corresponds to the fabrication of artificial world of things, creates a world distinct from anything given in nature and, a world distinguished by its durability and semi-permanence. Humanity in this mode of its activity, Arendt calls, homo faber. It includes those actions like economic activities, professional actions etc. Homo Faber’s typical examples are the builders, the architects, the craftsmen, the artists and the legislators etc. They create the public world both physically and institutionally, by constructing buildings, painting pictures and making laws. For her, the activities involved in producing chairs, tools and implements, writing books or poems, composing music, art etc, are all forms of work. She is of the view that work is neither completely public nor completely private. It produces more durable things in comparison to labour. It is qualitatively different from labour.⁶ The products of work constitute what Arendt calls the “world.” The world is the ordered ‘totality of man-made objects so organised that it can resist the consuming process of the people dwelling in it and thus outlast them: With every durable object, man creates a distinctively human world and increases the difference between himself and nature. By creating a physical space between men and nature, work enables man to enclose himself within a man-made world and acquire a sense of distinctively human identity. In work, Arendt believes, man emerges for the first time to self-consciousness. But since the world in which he moves is a world of Things; not a world of Man, he does not reach the highest level of human development.

From the foregoing description, it is clear that the distinctions between labour and work are manifold; firstly, while labour is bound to the demands of animalities, of necessities, work is distinctly human (non-animal) activity violating the realm of nature by shaping and transforming it in accordance with the plans and human need. Secondly, since work is governed by human ends and intentions, it exhibits certain quality of freedom. Thirdly, labour remains essentially a private affair because it is concerned with life needs, but work is regarded as a semi-public activity. Last but not the least, labour and its efforts are inherently impermanent and perishable, the fabrications of work, on the other hand, are the preconditions for the existence of a political community. She is convinced that work, homo faber, does not equate with the realm of human freedom.

ACTION

Action, which falls within public realm, holds the highest place in Arendt's tripartite scheme of “Labour-Work -Action”. According to Arendt, human personality cannot be developed in labour at all, it can partially be developed in work, and it is perfectly developed by acting in public realm in action. Individual reveals himself in relation to other individuals through action. It is the primary source of meaning and value and gives moral significance to life. To her, action is one of the fundamental categories of the human condition

which constitutes the highest realization of the *vita activa*. In her view neither labour nor work enable individuals to disclose their identities. It is only in action and speech, in interacting with others, that individuals reveal their personality and unique identity. When an individual performs political action, he achieves human condition, i.e., *zoon politikon*. Thus, by viewing action as a mode of human togetherness, Arendt has been able to develop a conception of participatory democracy. Action, thus, includes the life of politics, thought and idea. Politics is the art which teaches men how to bring forth what is great and radiant.⁷ Only a man who abandons labour and work in order to engage in politics can properly be described as human, truly free and completely happy. The *raison d'être* of politics, therefore, is freedom and its field of experience is action.⁸ Freedom develops fully only when it is not hidden but appears in political action in a visible space. Her main contention is that freedom can be attained only through political action. Political action is great definer and concentrator of the self and introduces coherence into the self and its experience. Political action must be done in company with others and for the sake of all. Action is a common enterprise and human plurality is the basic condition of action.

According to Arendt, action and speech constitute the substance of political life. She defines political action as political speech and observes that most acts are performed in the manner of speech. Speech is a means to influence others and bringing about desired changes. Politics, as she believes, is the realm of public mass exchange, interaction and dialogue in which people come together, judge and act. She opines that action is speech and speech is action. She holds that there should be no difference in thinking, doing and acting—“*Manasyekam, Vachasyekam, Karmasyekam*”. Action is an interaction that goes on directly among humans and it also corresponds to the condition of plurality. This plurality, Arendt believes, is specifically the condition—not only the *conditio sine qua non*, but the *conditio per quam*—of all political life. She defines plurality as “the fact that men, not man, live on earth and inhabit the world” and says that it is the condition of human action “because we are all the same, that is, human, in such a way that nobody is ever the same as anyone else who ever lived, lives or will live.” Arendt says that ‘action is the political activity par excellence.’⁹ She urges that one needs to have courage to think and to speak and to make one’s thought public. In sum, politics, to Arendt, is an activist politics in which thinking, doing and acting are inseparable. In defining action as freedom and freedom as action, the decisive influence of St. Augustine upon Arendt’s thought is apparent. She takes the theme of human action as beginning-to act means to take initiative, to begin, to set something in motion. Man, she observes, “though they must die, are not born in order to die but in order to begin.” Arendt favours the human condition of action as it is both existential and aesthetic. In this way, Arendt, unlike Oakeshott who regards politicians a second-rate activity, believes that politics provides the only guarantee of our sanity and political action alone confers meaning upon life and the highest form of happiness is to be found in political action alone.

AESTHETIC ACTIVITY

Aesthetics is a branch of philosophy which deals with the nature of beauty, art and taste and with the creation and appreciation of beauty. In Aesthetic theory of Politics, politics is viewed as an artistic and structured like an art from which reciprocates the artistic conception of life being seen as an art. Hannah Arendt’s originality lies in the fact that she is alone in the history of political philosophy to regard politics as an aesthetic activity. Thinkers like Schiller, Schilling, Benjamin and others took an aesthetic view of the world but they thought of the state in coercive terms. Other thinkers who took an aesthetic view of morality, were not desirous to extend it to the state. To Arendt, politics is neither the pursuit of truth (Plato), nor the pursuit of good (Aristotle, Aquinas, Hobbes, Locke, Bentham, Mill, Hegel etc). She regards politics as the pursuit of beauty. She seems to add beauty (*Sundaram*) with truth (*Satyam*) and good (*Shivam*) making it *SATYAM, SHIVAM, SUNDARAM*. She is of the view that the primary concern of politics is to make the world beautiful. It is concerned with the appearance of the world, with how the world is to look’. Arendt’s concept of aesthetic activity is based on following objectives: -

Firstly, Politics is concerned with ecological and environmental issues. It aims to ensure that the ways of dealing with nature do not lead to the destruction of its beauty. But we have wantonly destroyed and continue to destroy natural beauty and harmony as well as polluted the environment. How we should relate to nature is one of the crucial problems of our time. And this, in turn, raises vital questions concerning the quality of life and the proper place of material consumption and the pursuit of materialism. In her own distinctive way, Arendt subsumes that politics is concerned with making life good and aesthetic. In contemporary world, the contamination of the physical and of the atmosphere system to such an extent that normal environment processes are adversely affected. It is one of the most serious problems facing humanity and other life forms on our planet. A healthy ecosystem for the protection of all living things is utterly necessary. To make the world beautiful, Arendt’s arguments are relevant in the sense that, we need to fight against environmental pollution to take steps towards a better tomorrow.

Secondly, Politics is an activity whose very existence depends upon public space. It is concerned with designing and structuring physical space that it articulates, reflects and gives visible expression to the political space citizens have succeeded in creating or wish to create among them. Politics, in other words, is concerned

with such question as town-planning, construction of infrastructure capable of combining the advantages and eliminating the evils of modern rural and urban life. Similar opinion about politics has been expressed by L. S. Rathore who observes, "Politics is a noble venture; it is a lofty and sublime art; it is the science of the highest technicalities; and it is a philosophy of superb excellence. Politics is an endless journey towards the realisation of means and ends; and it is a quest for pastures a new to fructify men's hopes and aspirations"¹⁰

Lastly, Arendt's conception of aesthetic activity seems to be based on Emmanuel Kant's Theory of aesthetics. She regards politics as a cultural and an aesthetic activity. It is the custodian of our civilization and its main function is to make the world a beautiful place. To her, politics is primarily concerned not with death, coercion and preventing people from harming one another but with birth which signifies uniqueness, human plurality, joy, appearance, new beginning, hope and creativity. An Indian political scientist rightly observes, "... if politics corrupts, it also ennobles; if it is a "trade for rascals" and "refuse of scoundrels" it is also an activity of saints; if it pulls down' it also lifts up; if it poisons, it also purifies; if it arouses passion, it also develops reasons; if it brings to the brink of perdition, it also paves the way for salvation."¹¹

Arendt's views on politics, no doubt, has been criticised on various grounds. Critics observe that her tripartite scheme of labour-work-action does not exhaust the *vita activa*; that making love, humanitarian work, religion etc find no place in her classification; that it is difficult to distinguish labour and work in modern age and her classification seems to be arbitrary and dogmatic. Further her view of politics is highly spatial and prevents her from giving an adequate account of political life; that for aesthetic view of politics is too narrow to take full account of the complexity of political life; that it contains an area of incoherence and generates a paradox, and, that the kind of politics she admires is unlikely to occur in her type of society. Despite criticisms, it may be said that Hannah Arendt is the only political theorist to offer an intensely political view of the world. She is, no doubt, the champion of participatory view of politics and advocates a new culture based on a public way of life. She appreciates the nature and value of politics; maintains that it is concerned with ecological and environmental issues and is concerned with " how the world is to look".

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