"Everything That Is Desires Its Own Being": Arendt's *Vita Activa* and Saint Augustine

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[Intium] ergo ut esset, creatus est homo, ante quem nullus fuit;
"that there be a beginning, man was created before whom there was nobody."
—Augustine, *De Civitate Dei*[1]

Abstract

In her study of the *vita activa*, or the active life, called *The Human Condition*, Hannah Arendt contrasts the idea of labor among the Greek theorists with that of the modern theorists, and introduces an idea of labor that is radically different from the two. It is the idea of laborious life oriented toward one's neighbor. Drawing on Arendt's dissertation *Der Liebesbegriff bei Augustin* (1929) [*Love and Saint Augustine* (1996)], in which she explored the notion of love in the works of Saint Augustine of Hippo (354-430), this essay aims to understand the laborious, active life that Arendt envisioned in *The Human Condition*.

Outline

I. The idea of labor
II. Saint Augustine's twofold understanding of *mundus* and the relevance of the neighbor
III. *Weltentfremdung* (alienation in the world) and the absence of the neighbor
IV. Action and the love of neighbor

I. The idea of labor

In *The Human Condition*, Hannah Arendt first distinguishes labor from

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[1] Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition, 2nd Edition*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 175.

work. "To labor meant to be enslaved by necessity,"[2] whereas to work is to give form to a substance for the sake of function. The maker (worker), in this sense, is the master. Labor is driven by all bodily sensations—"pleasure and pain, desires and satisfactions"—whereas work is driven by the image or "idea," according to which the master makes.[3] What drives labor cannot be adequately voiced nor reified, whereas, in work, the "image" that the master has in mind will be given form and represented in the outside world. Labor leaves nothing behind, its product almost immediately consumed when it is given form, whereas the "idea" of the master in work remains even after the object is finished. Labor is *ewige Wiederkehr* (eternal recurrence), is cyclic, and knows no beginning nor end except the death of the organism; work's end will come when the object is finished.[4] Labor produces consumer goods meant for immediate consumption, whereas work produces durable things that have "location, function, and length of stay in the world," which make our world reliable and "dwellable." Labor makes our species' survival possible; work makes human life possible. Labor belongs to *animal laborans*; work belongs to *homo faber*.

Arendt then juxtaposes the idea of labor of the Greek theorists such as Aristotle with that of the modern theorists such as John Locke and his successors. For the Greek theorists, labor is the dimension of human activity that free men in *polis* shared with animals and slaves. Aristotle, for example, thinks labor belongs to sheer necessity and to a part of his household. Thus, in the free man's life, labor is left to his slave—who Aristotle called a "living instrument" and "the lord of necessity"—who will look after his master's property ("lifeless instruments"), i.e., cows and plows, clothes and chairs (both "instruments for production" and "instruments for use"). But for the real master, the free man, life is action, not production. He is a political animal that knows how things should be managed in his household, in the village, and in the state, to which he belonged, "for the sake of 'Happiness,' or the 'good life.'"[5]

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[2] Arendt, *The Human Condition, 2nd Edition,* 83.
[3] Arendt, *The Human Condition, 2nd Edition*, 141.
[4] Arendt, *The Human Condition, 2nd Edition*, 97-98.
[5] Aristotle, *Politics: A New Translation,* (Cambridge, MA: Hackett Publishing, 2017) Book I.; Arendt, *The Human Condition, 2nd Edition*, 80-84.

Arendt contrasts this "contempt of labor" among the Greek theorists with the "elevation and celebration of labor" in the modern world. For the modern theorists, the distinction between the work of the body (labor) and the work of our hands (work) is completely irrelevant. Labor thus includes work in the modern world and is celebrated for its fertility and productivity. For Locke, labor allows the individual to claim his property. It is a land-appropriating activity. It is fertile insofar as it is the "source of all property."[6] Furthermore, Locke locates this fertility in the individual himself. He says, "Though the earth, and all inferior creatures, be common to all men, yet every man has a property in his own person: this no body has any right to but himself. The labour of his body, and the work of his hands, we may say, are properly his."[7]

Karl Marx too understood labor as fertile. When he contemplated the kinetics of the growth of wealth, the source of surplus value, Marx had nowhere else to locate it but in the simple physical and psychological capacity of a laborer, in his own person (one concrete, the other abstract). Labor is the "source of all productivity,"[8] because it is the only use-value that exists that can create more value, or the whole which is quantitatively greater than the sum of its parts.[9] For Marx, men are "*animal laborans*" first and foremost, and philosophers only second.

The degradation of human beings to the level of *animal laborans* and elevation of labor to the source of morals—Jeremy Bentham's twin sovereign of pleasure and pain[10]—and labor as the source of human beings (to the level of the "creator" of the species) in the modern world was, for Arendt, a "blasphemy." She asks "why Locke and all his successors, their own insights notwithstanding, clung so obstinately to labor as the origin of property, of wealth, of all values and finally, of the very humanity of man."[11] She thinks

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[6] Arendt, *The Human Condition, 2nd Edition*, 101.

[7] John Locke, *The Second Treatise on Civil Government*, (Amherst, NY: Prometheus, 1986), sec. 27, quoted in Arendt, *The Human Condition, 2nd Edition*, 70.

[8] Arendt, *The Human Condition, 2nd Edition*, 101.

[9] Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy. Volume I: The Process of Capitalist Production*, (New York, NY: International Publishers, 1987).

[10] Jeremy Bentham, *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*, (London: Dover Publications, 2007).

[11] Arendt, *The Human Condition, 2nd Edition,* 105.

this was because all these theorists saw the growth of wealth as a natural "process" — e.g., money begets money—that exists independently of human will or intellect. These theorists found the reproductive process—labor—in the human species (the fertility of man) just as they found natural, progressive growth in nature (the fertility of soil) and thought it was independent of human will or intellect. The notion of "life process" was such that these modern theorists saw this process in society: "the life process of society."[12] Arendt writes, "If any human activity was to be involved in the process at all, it could only be a bodily 'activity' whose natural functioning could not be checked even if one wanted to do so. To check these 'activities' is indeed to destroy nature, and for the whole modern age, whether it holds fast to the institution of private property or considers it to be an impediment to the growth of wealth, a check or control of the process of wealth was equivalent to an attempt to destroy the very life of society."[13]

It is worth noting that this idea of labor as the "creator" of species and the "life" of society is what Michael Taussig suspects as "modern animism" of the European colonizers in the New World— "think for a moment Adam Smith's invisible hand as the modern version of animism."[14] In the rubber plantations of the Putumayo in early twentieth-century Colombia, Indigenous people have different notions of exchange; "labor was not free or capable of being turned into a commodity."[15] According to Taussig, the massacre, torture, and rape of Indigenous population—the disciplining of labor power, or more precisely, its annihilation—resulted from the meeting of two economies: gift economy and capitalist economy.

> Here, where labor was not free or capable of being turned into a commodity, it was not merely rubber and European trade goods that were subject to fetishization. More important still was the fetishization of the debt of debt-peonage that these commodities constellated and in which the entire imaginative force, the ritualization and viciousness, of

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[12] Arendt, *The Human Condition, 2nd Edition,* 99, fn. 34.
[13] Arendt, *The Human Condition, 2nd Edition*, 112.
[14] Michael Taussig, *Shamanism, Colonialism, and the Wild Man: A Study in Terror and Healing*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1987), 129.
[15] Taussig, *Shamanism, Colonialism, and the Wild Man*, 53.

> colonial society was concentrated. A gigantic piece of make-believe, the debt was where the gift economy of the Indian meshed with the capitalist economy of the colonist.[16]

II. Saint Augustine's twofold understanding of *mundus* and the relevance of the neighbor

In her dissertation *Der Liebesbegriff bei Augustin* (1929) [*Love and Saint Augustine* (1996)], Arendt first discusses Saint Augustine's experience with the works of the Greek theorists—especially Plotinus, who was, according to Arendt, Augustine's "greatest pseudo-Christian experience." She then discusses the experience of later Augustine, whom she calls "Pauline." By meditating on the "Pauline" part of Augustine and his question of the relevance of the neighbor, Arendt is attempting to take up what Martin Heidegger left out from his study of *Dasein* and the worldliness of the world. "While [Heidegger's] interpretation is thus confined to illuminating the world as 'living with the world at heart,' and the other world concept, though mentioned, remains uninterpreted, the aim of our interpretation is precisely to make this twofold approach understood."[17]

According to Arendt, Heidegger distinguished the two Augustinian meanings of *mundus*[18] but only took up one. For Augustine, the word *mundus* has a twofold meaning. Augustine said, "So the world, since God created all things simultaneously, should be regarded as simultaneously containing all that was made in and with it."[19] *Mundus*, for Augustine, was *ens creatum* (heaven and earth which God made) on the one hand, and the inhabitants of the world (the world conceived as the "lovers of the world") on the other.[20] Heidegger took up only the latter aspect of the twofold meaning of *mundus* by Augustine when he writes, "World, therefore, means the *ens in toto,* as the decisive How, according to which human existence relates to, and

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[16] Taussig, *Shamanism, Colonialism, and the Wild Man*, 128.
[17] Hannah Arendt, *Love and Saint Augustine*, 66, fn. 80.
[18] Martin Heidegger, *Vom Wesen des Grundes*. (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, Fünfte Auflage, 1965), 25.
[19] Augustine, *Literal Commentary on Genesis V*, 23, 45, quoted in Arendt, *Love and Saint Augustine*, 66, fn. 80.
[20] Arendt, *Love and Saint Augustine*, 66.

acts toward, the *ens*."[21] For Heidegger, the world is "the human world which constitutes itself by habitation and love (*diligere*)," or "living with the world at heart."[22]

With the concept of the *vita activa*, Arendt attempts to take up the twofold meaning of Augustine's *mundus*. The *vita activa* is the life of the inhabitants, or the "lovers of the world," in *ens creatum*. It is the life of man as God's creation in the heaven and earth that God made, where God the Creator is the author of life. Here, Augustine's idea of "natality," or the fact that we *were given birth to*, is essential for us to understand Arendt's emphasis of the twofold meaning of *mundus*. Arendt writes, "Although everybody started his life by inserting himself into the human world through action and speech, nobody is the author or producer of his own life story."[23] "*[Intium] ergo ut esset, creatus est homo, ante quem nullus fuit* (that there be a *beginning*, man was created before whom there was nobody)."[24] Man, as God's creation, enters the world—which is conceived by Arendt as—the plurality of man.

The following diagram explains Arendt's understanding of the *vita activa*, the universal human condition. Interestingly, Arendt's idea of the *vita activa* parallels Augustine's experience.

Diagram 1. Arendt's idea of the *vita activa* & Saint Augustine's experience

Sphere of life	Labor	Work	Action
Products/ fruits	consumer goods	things for use and for enjoyment	action and speech (and their fruits)
Agent	*animal laboran*	*homo faber*	actor/agent/subject

[21] Heidegger, *Vom Wesen des Grundes*, 26, quoted in Arendt, *Love and Saint Augustine*, 66, fn. 80.
[22] Arendt, *Love and Saint Augustine*, 66.
[23] Arendt, *The Human Condition, 2nd Edition*, 184.
[24] Arendt, *The Human Condition, 2nd Edition*, 175.

Driving force	bodily sensations (pleasure and pain, desires and satisfactions) *appetitus*	well-ordered love, "virtue," the love of the world, *cupiditas*	the love of neighbor, *caritas*
Conclusion	death is its end	product is its end	new beginnings

Augustine's experience	I-myself	I-myself and my God	my neighbor and I-myself and God

According to Arendt, Augustine's real conversion was not when he wrote, "I have become a question to myself," and when he reflected on his relationship to God. Augustine's real conversion came when the relevance of the neighbor became a question to him (the "Pauline" part of Augustine). (That is when Augustine departed from the theory of "self-sufficiency"—a kind of withdrawal from the world—by Plotinus, his greatest pseudo-Christian experience.)

There is an irreversible order in the *vita activa*: "The whole factual world of human affairs depends for its reality and its continued existence, *first,* upon the presence of others who have seen and heard and will remember and, *second,* on the transformation of the intangible into the tangibility of things."[25] As Maurice Halbwachs suggested, the person is in the memory rather than memory is in the person; without the collective that will remember, the person's memory and identity would cease to exist.[26] Memory is intrinsically collective. Furthermore, Arendt is not saying that being a political animal (for whom life is action, not production) is prior to being a *homo faber*. For Arendt, Aristotle's "good life" too presupposed the others as means to an end, because life of a political animal was for the sake of the "good life."[27] "What is beside and next to me, I-myself and my

[25] Arendt, *The Human Condition, 2nd Edition*, 95. Italics added.

[26] Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

[27] Arendt saw consumer society as a perfect condition for alienation in the world. Consumer society is the world of *animal laborans* (and some *homo fabers*). According to her, the distinction between labor and work rarely exists today, and the only exception that Arendt could think of was that of artists. (Unlike laborers

neighbor, is neither to be 'used' [*uti*] nor to be 'enjoyed'[*frui*]," writes Arendt.[28]

In the *vita activa*, the order is irreversible: the presence of others comes before the worldliness of the world. For Arendt, the very fact that the self is not alone in the world but in the presence of others is the only condition for something radically new to be able to emerge, whereas Plato and his successors saw the condition of plurality as the effect of self's weakness that has to be "overcome." Arendt maintained,

> No man can be sovereign because not one man, but men, inhabit the earth—and not, as the tradition since Plato holds, because of man's limited strength, which makes him dependent upon the help of others. All the recommendations the tradition has to offer to overcome the condition of non-sovereignty and win an untouchable integrity of human person [and that sovereignty and freedom are the same] amount to a compensation for the intrinsic "weakness" of plurality.[29]

III. *Weltentfremdung* (alienation in the world) and the absence of the neighbor

Weltentfremdung, or the state of being alienated in the world, is the state in which the individual is in isolation. It is similar to the state of *homo faber*. Work is a means to an end, and both the maker and his "idea" are beside or outside the product. For Arendt, this man-confronting-his-product-as-an-outsider is only one part of the twofold nature of *mundus*—namely, the world as the "lovers of the world." *Homo faber* is alone but, thanks to his being alone, he is the master, he is *free*. "*Homo faber* is indeed a lord and master, not only because he is the master or has set himself up as the master of all nature but because he is master of himself and his doings. This is true neither of the *animal laboran,* who is subject to the necessity of his own life, nor of the man of action, who remains in dependence upon his fellow men. Alone with his image of the future product, *homo faber* is free to

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who do not even know what they are producing, artists have the "idea" still in mind when they create art, so artists still share something with *homo faber*.)

[28] Arendt, *Love and Saint Augustine*, 40.

[29] Arendt, *The Human Condition, 2nd Edition*, 234.

produce, and again facing alone the work of his hands, he is free to destroy."[30]

For Arendt, the absence of the neighbor is the condition for *homo faber*'s freedom. When the product is finished, *homo faber* confronts it, and "the world keeps its original strangeness, even as man by 'making' suits the world to himself."[31] *Homo faber* has two choices: "First, he can recall his own source and *withdraw* from this world which, by inhabiting it, he made habitable [the believer in search for God, or the Stoics in search for 'self-sufficiency']; or, second, he can once more *expressly appropriate* through desire."[32]

The real freedom of *homo faber* is, hence, the freedom in choices of what to do with the product. He can use and enjoy it, "love" or hate it, ignore, destroy, or withdraw from it. The worldliness of the world in which *homo faber* lives is sustained by his love of the world: "it is through the love of the world that man explicitly makes himself at home in the world, and then desirously looks to it alone for his good and evil. Not until then do the world and man grow 'worldly.'"[33]

The love of the world of *homo faber* is similar to the devotion of a believer, or the notion of love of pseudo-Christian Augustine, which is *craving*. In the case of *homo faber*, it is the "idea" of the product that stays even after the product is completed. In the case of a believer, it is his love of God, or *craving* that stays.

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[30] Arendt, *The Human Condition, 2nd Edition*, 145. Arendt says, "any product of man can be found as a thing in the world having no more to do with its maker. Man can withdraw from it any time, and its existence as a thing in the world will not cease for that reason. Man stands outside (*forinsecus*) his product and has no intrinsic power over it" (Arendt, *Love and Saint Augustine*, 67). Arendt then contrasts this relationship between carpenter and his product with that of God and His creation. "For He did not make the world as a carpenter makes a chest. The chest which the carpenter makes is outside of him and so is in another place while it is being made. And although the carpenter is nearby, he occupies another place and is external to what he makes. But God, infused into the world, fashioned it. He makes it, being present everywhere and He does not withdraw to some other place, nor does He, as it were, handle the matter which He makes from the outside" (Augustine, *Tractates on the Gospel of John* II, 10; quoted in Arendt, *Love and Saint Augustine*, 67, fn. 85).

[31] Arendt, *Love and Saint Augustine*, 67.

[32] Arendt, *Love and Saint Augustine*, 67. Italics added.

[33] Arendt, *Love and Saint Augustine*, 67.

IV. Action and the love of neighbor

Action is what brings *homo faber* out of his at-homeness in the world (and also out of the state of alienation in the world). The "Action" chapter in *The Human Condition* begins with a quote from Dante: "For in every action what is primarily intended by the doer, whether he acts from natural necessity or out of free will, is the disclosure of his own image. Hence it comes about that every doer, in so far as he does, takes delight in doing; *since everything that is desires its own being,* and since in action the being of the doer is somehow intensified, delight necessarily follows. . . Thus, nothing acts unless [by acting] it makes patent its latent self."[34]

What Arendt is trying to convey by quoting Dante—and her emphasis on the Greek theorists makes it difficult for us to understand—is what Augustine was pointing at when he said, "Now you are miserable and still you do not want to die for no other reason than you want to *be*."[35] In the self's utter misery, there is yet the will to *be*. (Augustine exclaimed, "Give thanks for wanting to *be* as you are that you may be delivered from an existence that you do not want. For you are willing to *be* and unwilling to be miserable."[36]) Arendt states that "This will to *be* under all circumstances is the hallmark of man's attachment to the transmundane source of his existence."[37] This wanting to be is not hope or desire, or volition, strictly speaking, but results from the self's appreciation of one's *natality*—the fact that he/she was "begotten," that he/she is indeed God's wager for a new beginning; a mystery far beyond human comprehension. The will to *be* results from being grateful for life having been given at all.[38]

One particular scene in Rainer M. Rilke's *The Notebooks of Malte*

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[34] Dante, *De monarchia* i. 13, quoted in Arendt, *The Human Condition, 2nd Edition*, 175. Italics added.

[35] Augustine, *On Free Choice of the Will*. (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1993), III, 6, 83).

[36] Augustine, *On Free Choice of the Will*, III, 6, 83, quoted in Arendt *Love and Saint Augustine*, 52.

[37] "This will to *be* under all circumstances is the hallmark of man's attachment to the transmundane source of his existence. Unlike the desire for the 'highest good,' this attachment does not depend upon volition, strictly speaking. Rather, it is characteristic of the human condition as such" (Arendt, *Love and Saint Augustine*, 52).

[38] Arendt, *Love and Saint Augustine*, 52.

Laurids Brigge may illustrate this point. It is the experience of Malte in Paris, when he found the wretched, old newspaper seller dressed in his Sunday attire:

> I realized that he was wearing a different hat and a necktie that was undoubtedly reserved for Sundays; it had a pattern of diagonal yellow and violet checks; and as for the hat, it was a cheap new straw hat with a green band. The colors… on him they were like the softest down on a bird's breast. He himself didn't get any pleasure from them, and who among all these people (I looked around me) could have thought that this finery was meant for them? *My God, I thought with sudden vehemence, so you really are. These are proofs of your existence.* I have forgotten them all and never even wanted any, for what a huge obligation would lie in the certainty of you. And yet that is what has just been shown to me. This, then, is what tastes good to you; this is what gives you pleasure.[39]

The wretched old newspaper seller is the "*Beweise*,"or the proof for Malte that God surely exists. "*This, then, is what tastes good to you; this is what gives you pleasure.*" Malte's surrounding immediately permeates with gratitude. "*That we should learn to endure everything and never judge. What things are filled with gravity? What things with grace? Only you know.*"[40] Malte then prays to God, "When winter comes again and I need a new coat—grant that I may wear it *like that*, for as long as it is new."[41]

Action is like the wretched newspaper man in a Sunday dress. It bears fruit in Malte, who was as wretched as the old newspaper seller when they met. Malte prays that he would wear a new coat *like him*. He will in turn become a *Beweise*, or proof of God's existence. The relationship between the self and the neighbor is not Aristotle's idea of the relationships between master and slave, husband and wife, and father and son. The relationship

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[39] Rilke, Rainer M., *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge,* (New York, NY: Vintage Books, 1990), 211-212. Italics added. (See also リルケ 2007: 254-259; Rilke 2000: 165-168).

[40] Rilke, *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge,* 211. Italics added.

[41] Rilke, *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge,* 211-212.

between the self and the neighbor is three-fold (my neighbor—I-myself—God). Arendt writes, "What is beside and next to me, I-myself and my neighbor, is neither to be 'used' [*uti*] nor to be 'enjoyed'[*frui*]."[42] Your neighbor is not "for the sake of" and your self is not "for the sake of"—they are not even for the sake of the "highest good." It is not the relationship of good life, but of *holy life*. It is in the neighbor—another begotten existence—that the self becomes a witness to one's createdness and God's grace.

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[42] Arendt, *Love and Saint Augustine*, 40, italics added.

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