

# The human condition in the age of automation

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# Table of Contents

Part 1. Introduction.....	3
Part 2. The human condition .....	5
Conceptualization .....	5
The public and the private realm.....	8
Immortality .....	10
A society of laborers .....	12
Action as the highest realization of the vita activa.....	13
Part 3. Automation.....	15
The natural cycle of life.....	15
Three tacit assumptions.....	18
Life of the Gods.....	19
A society of work and action.....	20
Part 4. Conclusion and final thoughts.....	21
Bibliography .....	23

## Part 1. Introduction

Technology is changing the world in an unpredictable way. While it is never certain what new scientific discoveries or technological developments will bring, it seems certain that rigorous change is coming. Anyone who fell asleep twenty ago and wakes up today would be astonished to see the technological changes or still believe to be dreaming. These new technologies effect people in many ways. Hannah Arendt (1906-1975) noted this by stating that humans are conditioned beings. Living under the threat of an atomic war, she thought that people who invented these technologies didn't know what they were doing. In *The Human Condition* Arendt developed a theory in which she scrutinized the conditions under which life has been given to people (Arendt, 1958). Focusing on active life, she bluntly states her central objective as "finding out what we are doing". Though not immediately apparent, the book is essentially a political work. This is largely because of the emphasis Arendt places on the activity of political action. She finds a reference point in the ancient Greek world from which she critically observes the world in which she writes. The modern age, fueled by technological developments, imposes a threat to the way people live. Automation plays a central role in this development and is a frequently recurring theme throughout the book. On this problem, Arendt writes: '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'.<sup>1</sup>

Today this concern seems to be as alive as when *The Human Condition* was first published almost 60 years ago. Yet, there is no sign of mass unemployment or any other problems directly connected to automation. Arendt relates her concern to a more general critique of consumer society that has no regard for the intrinsic worth of the objects it produces or consumes. Economics is crowned as the social science par excellence, and is said to exist because modern people behave according to the same pattern.<sup>2</sup> As an economics student, I have read *The Human Condition* with great interest, sharing much of its critique on modern society. However, unlike Arendt, I am quite optimistic about automation. In this thesis, I argue that Arendt's argument against automation depends on a number of dubious assumptions and inferences. Taking her philosophical framework as a starting point, I arrive at the opposite conclusion, that is: automation has the potential to improve society.

The hypothesis is:

*Building on Arendt's conception of the human condition, automation does not form a threat to society.*

Before defending this thesis, I will first provide an overview of *The Human Condition* in part 2. The book contains a lot of information and arguments relating to many topics. There is also no

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<sup>1</sup> Arendt, H (1998/1958). *The Human Condition*, 2nd ed. London: University of Chicago Press, p. 5.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. p. 42.

systematic structure of arguments and many words are redefined according to Arendt's own language. In this overview, I will illuminate the main concepts, especially when related to Arendt's critique on automation, and try to articulate the core of Arendt's philosophy. Holding on to this core, I will turn to defending the hypothesis in part 3 by laying out Arendt's position against automation and consequently point out inconsistencies in her philosophical framework. Part 4 concludes by giving an overview of Arendt's arguments against automation, followed by a brief summary of why her arguments are inconsistent and what potential that creates for automation according to her own account. In addition, some final thoughts are given regarding the nature of this thesis.

## Part 2. The human condition

### *Conceptualization*

The human condition as it is conceptualized by Arendt is the main element that needs to be explored. Before anything can be said about the human condition in our age, it must be clear what Arendt exactly meant with the human condition and how she thought it was influenced. It must be noted that the human condition consists out of two equally important parts: *vita activa* and *vita contemplativa*. The former 'corresponding to human life insofar as it is actively engaged in doing something'<sup>3</sup> and the latter corresponding to human life insofar as it is engaged in contemplation. Though the human condition is an overarching term, Arendt only covers the *vita activa* in *The Human Condition*. According to Hans Achterhuis, she thereby radically breaks with the traditional philosophical approach because she engages with the everydayness of laboring and working life (Achterhuis, 2011). This is why Arendt articulates the central theme of her book as 'an investigation of what we are doing'. Concerning the subject of automation, *vita activa* is the only relevant part when discussing the human condition.

*Vita activa* consists of three basic elements which form the framework of *The Human Condition*: labor, work and action. Labor constitutes all activities corresponding to the biological process that makes human existence possible in the first place. Because our needs of preservation are never fulfilled, the fruits of labor are quickly consumed and more must always be produced. The most typical activity of labor, which is discussed most by Arendt throughout the book and is most relevant, is laboring for the sole purpose of staying alive. This could be as a slave or as a factory laborer occupied with no other job than screwing lids on tubes of toothpaste on an assembly line. However, labor extends to any activity corresponding to biological life. Eating, and giving birth are thus also included in the labor activity.

Where labor relates to this biological and natural dimension of human existence, work corresponds to the unnaturalness of human existence. 'Work provides an "artificial" world of things, distinctly different from all natural surroundings'.<sup>4</sup> The activity of work is what would distinguish us humans from other animals. It aims to create a world that goes beyond the aim of preserving life. Rather than an object for consumption, it leaves behind a durable object that becomes part of our newly created world. A typical example of work would be the activity of designing a building that is not only meant to live in, but also to contribute to an aesthetic architectural landscape.

Action is the means by which we distinguish ourselves from others as unique and unexchangeable human beings and actualize our capacity for freedom. It is clear from Arendt's writings that she holds action as the highest realization of the *vita activa*. The two central

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid. p. 22.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid. p. 7.

features of action are plurality and freedom. Plurality is the idea of manifesting oneself in public among equals who see, hear and therefore testify of one's existence with a different perspective.<sup>5</sup> Freedom, as Arendt defines it, is the capacity to begin or to start something new. It is the ability to do the unexpected with which every human being is endowed (and which distinguishes us from other animals). It is this aspect of *The Human Condition* that essentially makes it a political work. Exercising politics with debate or speech before a crowd is the most eminent example of action. The following part is devoted to eliciting why labor, work and action are such fundamental features of the human condition. How exactly are they related to the human condition, and why are they of such central importance? Before these questions can be answered, some other important concepts should be made clear.

Men are conditioned by everything that surrounds them. This includes natural things with which the world was always endowed, but also things produced by man itself. Arendt describes man as a conditioned being who constantly creates his own self-made condition.<sup>6</sup> Everything with which it comes into contact turns immediately into a condition of its existence. In this the human condition is to be distinguished from human nature. The latter seems to be defined as constituting everything that makes man a human being. The most radical change in the human condition (which according to Arendt is the emigration of men from earth) would not be a change in human nature because it would not make us less human. Defining ourselves like we define all things around us would be like 'Jumping over our own shadow'.<sup>7</sup> The human condition on the other hand is something that can be defined and is susceptible to change (and changes all the time). This susceptibility to change makes it relevant to investigate what influence automation might have on our human condition.

But what exactly is this human condition Arendt named her book to? It seems to be a very broad concept that encompasses any condition under which we as humans exist. Things become more concrete when Arendt links specific conditions of human existence to her concepts of labor, work and action. 'The human condition of labor', she says, 'is life itself'.<sup>8</sup> This makes sense, as labor is defined as the activity that sustains the biological process of the human body. After Arendt introduces the concept of work, she adds: 'The human condition of work is worldliness'. This corresponds to the idea that life for humans is more than life itself. It is the unnaturalness to human life that distinguishes us from animals and their sole purpose of self-preservation and reproduction. The human condition of action is plurality, meaning the presence of others is a condition to be heard and distinguish yourself.

In addition to life itself, worldliness and plurality, Arendt mentions three more 'conditions of human existence': natality, mortality and the earth<sup>9</sup>. Natality and mortality are the most

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid. p. 95.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid. p. 9.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid. p. 10.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid. p. 7.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. p. 11.

general conditions of human existence, and they are intimately connected with the three activities of labor, work and action and their corresponding conditions. The connection between labor and mortality is straightforward, as labor is defined as a means to prevent death. Work and mortality have a less obvious connection, but will appear to be of central importance of the concerns that are presented in the book. The human artifact as a product of the activity of work 'bestows a measure of permanence and durability upon the futility of mortal life and the fleeting character of human time'.<sup>10</sup> Work therefore carries a sense of a quest for immortality. The most important and intimate connection is the one between natality and action. Only when noticing the central importance of these two conditions and their connection, one can realize the political nature of the book. Inherent in action is freedom (the ability and possibility to begin something new). With each birth, something unique comes into the world. This is exactly how Arendt conceives of the act of freedom. She describes it as a rebirth in which the unexpected may be expected.<sup>11</sup> Emphasizing the importance of this she writes: 'A life without speech and without action [...] is literally dead to the world; it has ceased to be a human life because it is no longer lived among men'.<sup>12</sup> Here she was not misusing the world 'literally' to add some weight, as is increasingly common today. Like with many other words, she has her own conception of what it means to be born or to die. Speech and action are part of human nature, which means anyone without these features in its life is not considered human and in that sense stops living.

The final condition of human existence is the earth. With this Arendt aims at the fact that men are conditioned by everything they come into contact with, including both natural things and things made by humans themselves. We are conditioned by the glasses we wear and the camera's that are watching us: 'Men are conditioned beings because everything they come in contact with turns immediately into a condition of their existence'.<sup>13</sup> Though the earth contains the most elements that influence the human condition (which is why an emigration of men from earth is considered the most radical change in the human condition), this condition is discussed the least throughout the book. As there is no further specification of what it entails or how it may have a positive or negative influence on society, it will not be discussed in this thesis

The human condition thus comprehends everything that conditions us as humans and consequently forms a condition of human existence. How we are conditioned effects the way humans live and how society is structured. This thesis is centered around the effects automation might have on society by going into the connection between automation and these conditions of human existence.

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid. p. 8.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid. p. 176.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid. p. 9.

## *The public and the private realm*

Arendt's reference point in ancient Greece becomes most apparent in her discussion of how the private and public realm have changed through time leading up to the modern age. She asserts that the ancient Greeks lived with a clear and important distinction between a public and a private realm. The former finding its form in the private household and the latter finding its form in the Greek city-state (*polis*). Every citizen belonged to two orders of existence: what is his own and what is communal. With the arrival of the modern age,<sup>14</sup> this – to Arendt valuable – demarcation got disturbed by a third realm named the social realm.

The private realm in ancient Greek society is characterized by a strict hierarchy in which the head of the household had an undisputed power over its property (including women, children and slaves). Because city politics simply had nothing to do with whatever went on within the confinements of the household, even the power of the tyrant was less 'perfect' than that of the *pater familias*.<sup>15</sup> The driving force of living together in a household was life itself. It was the place where the most basic human needs were fulfilled, which intimately connects it with the activity of labor. Men and slaves labored for nourishment and women labored by giving birth and caring for children. The hierarchical structure of the private realm was a means to warrant the biological process. An important condition for participating in the public realm was that men had dealt with their biological necessities of life. Necessity justified the strict hierarchy (and the violence when it was not respected) in the private household. Thus, the absence of necessity in the public sphere was meant to foster an equal and safe environment.

Whereas the private realm is the sphere where labor takes place, the public realm is the sphere of action and thus freedom and plurality. In the Greek *polis*, free male citizens could come together as equals, contrasting the strictest possible non-equality of the private household. According to Arendt, all Greek philosophers took it for granted that freedom was an exclusive feature of the political realm, while necessity was primarily a pre-political phenomenon. This sphere of equality and the lack of necessity create the conditions of Arendt's conception of freedom. To be free, as she puts it, meant 'neither to rule nor to be ruled'.<sup>16</sup> Since the public realm was free of necessity and consisted merely of equals, there was no violence. Only necessity condoned violence. All this created a perfect environment to express oneself in public and to be 'reborn'.

As the ability to be free and introduce the unexpected into the world in the presence of a plurality of equals is central to the human condition, the presence and clear demarcation of both the public and private, like in ancient Greece, is of great importance in Arendt's theory.

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<sup>14</sup> Defined by Arendt as the beginning from the 17<sup>th</sup> century to the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Not to be confused with the "modern world", which is the period that starts from the first atomic explosion. Page 6

<sup>15</sup> Ibid. p. 27.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid. p. 32.

The modern age, she laments, has given rise to the social sphere which not only blurred the old borderline between private and political, but also changed beyond recognition the meaning of the two terms and their significance for the life of the individual and the citizen.<sup>17</sup> This happened because politics became a function of society. Using Karl Marx's language, Arendt argues that action and speech became superstructures upon social interest.<sup>18</sup> Economic activities that traditionally belonged to the private realm of the household became a collective concern. Arendt does not provide a concrete example to illustrate her point, but the tendency to gratify necessities in a public domain happens everywhere around us. People do not enter the public realm after their basic needs have been fulfilled to consequently be able to manifest their opinion among equals for the sake of being heard and understood. Rather, people enter the public realm to find a job in a factory or persuade people to vote for the party that supports their interests. This change in society is not a result of choice, but the direct result of the arrival of modern times and its concomitant technologies. You can't stay nourished by performing labor in the private sphere anymore because that is not how our modern economy is structured. Arendt's main concern with the abolishment of the border line between private and public is that an important condition for political action and freedom, namely the absence of necessity (and therefore also violence and hierarchy), is no longer met.

Another consequence of the disappearance of the borders between private and public is the ascent of conformism. The public interfering with the private has caused a tendency in which 'society expects from each of its members a certain kind of behavior, imposing innumerable and various rules, all of which tend to "normalize" its members and make them behave'.<sup>19</sup> Arendt goes on to argue that conformism in society is made possible because of the replacement of action with behavior. In the Greek *polis*, (the few privileged) men were equal in the sense that they were permitted to live among one's peers, but the point of action in the *polis* was to distinguish oneself from all others as 'the doer of great deeds, and the speaker of great words'.<sup>20</sup> Modern conformist society, however, created an equality that urged its citizens to behave in the same socially desirable way. This is, Arendt claims, what lies at the root of the modern science of economics and statistics, whose births coincided with the rise of the social sphere.<sup>21</sup> Economic activities have only been able to get a scientific character because people became social beings that conform to certain patterns of behavior.

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid. p. 38.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid. p. 33.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid. p. 40.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid. p. 25.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid. p. 42.

## *Immortality*

Now that the basic and most relevant concepts in *The Human Condition* have been illustrated, we can turn our attention to the significance of labor, work and action that Arendt ascribed to the human condition. In that way, the effect of automation on the human condition can be assessed in part 6 by looking at what effect automation would have on labor, work and action respectively. In addition to these three modes of active engagement and their corresponding “conditions of human existence” (life itself, worldliness and plurality), natality, mortality were introduced by Arendt as the most general conditions of human existence, which are intimately related with the others.<sup>22</sup> In addition to the significance of each component to the human condition, this section elaborates on this intimate relation and the influence of the modern age overall.

If the book contains one element that seems to connect all components of the human condition and explains “what we are doing”, it is the notion that all humans strive for immortality. Arendt briefly mentions this central notion when she shares the opinion of Heraclitus and Socrates that men distinguish themselves from animals because they ‘prefer immortal fame to mortal things’.<sup>23</sup> Later, she makes it more explicit by stating that the striving for immortality had originally been the spring and center of the *vita activa*.<sup>24</sup> Here Arendt doesn’t state “what we are doing”, but rather what we have been doing (until the rise of the modern age and the social realm), and what we should be doing. In other words, it is what is wrong with modern society. It becomes clear that Arendt places this pursuit of immortality at the center of the *vita activa* when she goes deeper into the discussion of the rise of the social realm, labor, work and action.

The distinction between labor and work is an unusual one. Arendt argues that this distinction has been ignored by philosophers throughout history even though every European language, ancient and modern, contains two etymologically unrelated words for what is regarded as the same activity. The reason no one made this distinction in ancient Greece was because the people (the free male citizens) of the *polis* despised labor and work because of the slavish nature of all occupations that served the needs for the maintenance of life.<sup>25</sup> Rather than pursuing futile products that leave no trace or monument worthy of remembrance, the men of the *polis* strived for freedom from necessity and occupied themselves with great words and deeds. Slaves and women were left to labor in the private household, so that the men of the *polis* could perform action in the public realm. The importance of labor and work to Arendt boils down to how these contribute to the natural human quest for immortality. Labor is the most literal way to go on this quest in the sense that it corresponds to all activities that are

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid. p. 8.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid. p. 19.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid. p. 21.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid. p. 81, 83.

meant to prevent you from dying. Of course, all humans are destined to die despite the toil and effort of labor. Although activities of self-preservation and reproduction are necessary conditions to maintain life on earth and to be able to strive for immortality in the first place, it succeeds least well of all three activities. The fruits of labor perish as soon as they are consumed and leave no durable trace on the world. This is where the importance of work comes in: 'Work and its product, the human artifact, bestow a measure of permanence and durability upon the futility of mortal life and the fleeting character of human time'.<sup>26</sup> Immortality, in some sense, is thus achieved through the activity of work by leaving a durable trace or a monument to be remembered into the world.

Arendt presents the fruits of both activities as being of vital importance to the human condition. While the product of labor keeps one alive, the product of work guarantees the permanence and durability without which a world would not be possible at all. While both activities are important, the durability and worldly character of the product of work make the activity of labor of a lesser order than the activity of work when it comes to the ultimate goal of immortality. Emphasizing this hierarchy, Arendt writes:

Viewed as part of the whole, the products of work – and not the product of labor – guarantee the permanence and durability without which a world would not be possible at all. It is within this world of durable things that we find the consumer goods through which life assures the means of its own survival.<sup>27</sup>

Which activities are exactly categorized as an act of labor or work remains vague throughout the book. At one point, Arendt mentions artists, poets, historiographers, monument-builders and writers as workers.<sup>28</sup> However, this is in the context of Arendt illustrating the dependence of action on work. Therefore, it is likely that she chose professions corresponding to forms of work that are capable of delivering a political message of some sort. Besides these professions, she frequently takes the craftsman as an example of a worker.<sup>29</sup> Like the artist, the craftsman indeed produces durable objects. However, the artist and the craftsman probably also work to stay nourished and provide for their family. In this sense, there is always an element of labor included. On the other hand, a factory laborer who works all day to pay its bill may also be producing durable objects. The difference between labor and work becomes clearer when Arendt distinguishes between fabricating as a means or as an end. The products of work are produced for the sake of producing it and production comes to an end whenever the worker finishes the product. The product is thus an end in itself. The products of labor are produced as a means to an end (mostly to earn money or not get fired) and production only comes to an

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid. p. 8.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid. p. 94.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid. p. 173.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid. p. 80, 90, 133, 154, 163.

end with the exhaustion of labor power.<sup>30</sup> Anticipating the above-mentioned problem that an element of labor (wanting to earn money) is almost always included, Arendt writes:

‘The impulse toward repetition comes from the craftsman's need to earn his means of subsistence, in which case his working coincides with his laboring; or it comes from a demand for multiplication in the market, in which case the craftsman who wishes to meet this demand has added, as Plato would have said, the art of earning money to his craft. The point here is that in either case the process is repeated for reasons outside itself and is unlike the compulsory repetition inherent in laboring, where one must eat in order to labor and must labor in order to eat’.<sup>31</sup>

It seems that a single profession can thus contain elements of both work and labor. Though both the activity of labor and the activity of work are means to some end, the main difference lies in the idea that the product of labor is an end in itself because it corresponds to the striving for immortality. The product of work, on the other hand, is a means to sustain life, which in turn has immortality as its goal. Labor, strictly speaking, is therefore a means to a means to an end. The inferior position of labor in relation to work is thus explained by the fact that it is less closely related to this ultimate goal of human life.

### *A society of laborers*

One of Arendt's main concerns with the modern age is that the social realm transformed all communities in societies of laborers, centered around the activity of sustaining life.<sup>32</sup> The activity of labor, despised by the Ancient Greeks because of its slavish character, got glorified in the modern age and thereby transformed from a private household activity to an activity performed in public. ‘Whatever we do,’ Arendt states, ‘we are supposed to do for the sake of “making a living”’; such is the verdict of society, and the number of people, especially in the professions who might challenge it, has decreased rapidly’.<sup>33</sup> This drags us into a worldless cycle of labor and consumption. The admiration of an efficient labor force resulted in an accumulation of wealth that goes far beyond the human capacity to consume. The solution mankind found to this problem, Arendt argues, ‘consists in treating all use objects as though they were consumer goods, so that ‘a chair or a table is now consumed as rapidly as a dress and a dress used up almost as quickly as food’.<sup>34</sup> This means that durable items that were once a product of work, have become products of labor in the modern world and are quickly consumed. This process is inherent to a consumer society, which always seeks to consume as

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid. p. 143.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid. p. 46.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid. p. 126, 172.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid. p. 124.

much as it can. The endlessness of the laboring process is guaranteed by the ever-recurrent needs of consumption, but the end of production can only be assured if its products lose its use character (inherent in the product of work) and become objects of consumption.

Arendt mentions two reasons for the increased productivity that resulted in this predicament. The first factor is the division of labor,<sup>35</sup> which is an economic development that got written down formally by Adam Smith in his *Wealth of Nations* in 1776. Arendt calls this a typical example of what happens to the laboring activity when the public realm takes over economic activities from the private realm.<sup>36</sup> She argues that the consequence of the division of labor is that the production process is divided into many little parts for which no individual skill is required. Each person in the production process consequently gets occupied with constant repetition of the same simple task. Division of labor thus means that the production process of skilled workers moves to unskilled laborers with a more specific task. Imagine a table no longer being built by a single craftsman, but by a set of laborers behind an assembly line of which one does the gluing, one does the grinding, one does the polishing, etcetera. The second factor causing the transition of use products into consumption products and the concomitant consumer mentality is the advent of automation. This will be discussed in length in part 4.

#### *Action as the highest realization of the vita activa*

For a book categorized under political philosophy, *The Human Condition* initially seems to have little to do with politics. There is nothing on the design of some ideal government, nothing hinting towards a new political ideology and there is little to find on typical political themes such as justice or liberty. However, after Arendt elaborates on the activities of labor and work, the part on action and the corresponding human condition of plurality, gives the book its political identity. Plurality is not only the indispensable condition for all political life, but also the sufficient condition.<sup>37</sup> As action is placed at the 'spring and center of the *vita activa*',<sup>38</sup> *The Human Condition* is not so much about politics itself, but rather about the practice of politics as a fundamental feature in human life. Politics include all acts of active citizenship, in which people deliberately engage in public matters. Action is based around both equality and distinction. On the one hand, people who engage in political action must, like in the *polis*, be equal in the sense that participants are 'neither to rule nor to be ruled' and can understand each other. On the other hand, the public realm is the place where people define themselves through their uniqueness in relation to others. While labor and its products are means to sustain the biological cycle of life and work is a means to create an end in the form of a product

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<sup>35</sup> The division of labor is the separation of tasks that allows producers to specialize in the product it produces most efficiently.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid. p. 47.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid. p. 7.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid. p. 21.

or artefact, action and its product (the fabric of human relationships and affairs<sup>39</sup>) are ends in themselves. Paradoxically, they are ends because they mark the beginning of something new. Arendt sees in every human being the capacity to begin something new and to do the unexpected. In fact, this capacity to begin and to do the improbable signifies a uniqueness that defines us as human beings in the first place:

The origin of life from inorganic matter is an infinite improbability of inorganic processes, as is the coming into being of earth viewed from the standpoint of processes in the universe, or the evolution of human out of animal life<sup>40</sup>

Being able to utilize this fundamental human feature is what Arendt calls freedom, and lies at the core of Arendt's philosophy. Freedom under the condition of plurality makes action possible. It is like the condition of an audience that makes a theatre play possible. Without other human beings see, hear and testify what is being enacted with their own unique perspective there is not much sense in action or politics. Human beings define themselves through others to create their unique identity. The reason action is an end in itself, is because it -in Arendt's sense of the word - strives towards the ultimate goal of immortality by constantly beginning anew and being reborn. Action thereby breaks the biological cycle that is ontologically located between birth and death, or in Arendt's words:

It is the faculty of action that interferes with this law [of mortality] because it interrupts the inexorable automatic course of daily life, which in its turn, as we saw, interrupted and interfered with the cycle of the biological life process<sup>41</sup>

This picture of how human beings are defined explains Arendt's aversion to the growing conformism in the modern age. Conformism deprives human beings of their freedom to start something new and doing the unexpected ('great words and great deeds'). The social realm imposed rules to normalize its members and to make them behave according to a certain and strict pattern. The uncertainty as a consequence of doing the unexpected lost its appreciation. While people are excellent in performing labor in the social realm, action lost much of its former quality<sup>42</sup>. Normalizing rules work out perfectly to make an economy as efficient as possible, but the most fundamental human capacity and the foremost mode of human relationship gets lost in patterns of behavior that act conform the biological life cycle of mere preservation. From this notion, Arendt consistently refers to the laboring man as *animal laborans*. Modern society with its inherent conformism basically deprives humans of their identity as humans and relegates them to the state of an animal that finds ever more efficient ways to fulfill its animal needs.

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid. p. 95.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid. p. 178.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid. p. 246.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid. p. 49.

Next to the alienation of the ability of action (in other words: the restriction of freedom), Arendt describes a second troubling tendency of modern society. Like the activity of work, action has not completely been relinquished because of the rise of the modern age. However, the attempt to eliminate action because of its uncertainty has resulted in channeling the human capacity for action to serve as a means for something else, namely: '[...] for beginning new and spontaneous processes which without men never would come into existence [...]'.<sup>43</sup> This developed into an 'ever-increasing skill in unchaining elemental processes' and the 'art of "making" of nature' in which we 'repeat the process that goes on in the sun'. Here Arendt is referring to the negative consequences science can bring and more specifically the invention of the atomic bomb. She connects this with action because only the capacity to start something new and unexpected could have brought about this unprecedented outcome<sup>44</sup>. Furthermore, the tendency of "making" nature, starts processes of which the outcome is unpredictable and, like action, has no end other than the end of mankind.

This strong stance towards science and technology recurs throughout the book and plays an important part in Arendt's conception of the human condition. Though several technological developments make a brief appearance, only automation is discussed extensively in *The Human Condition*. Now that the main line has been laid out, we will turn our attention to this matter.

### Part 3. Automation

#### *The natural cycle of life*

The previous part has already hinted at Arendt's view on automation. Now Arendt's critique will be made explicit by on the one hand focusing on what she has written on the subject of automation and on the other, by linking automation to some of the tendencies of the modern age. Every objection to automation will be judged according to Arendt's framework of the human condition. In the prologue Arendt writes that with automation, a fundamental aspect of the human condition is at stake<sup>45</sup>. She formulates her critique more explicitly later in the book while discussing aspects of labor. However, as with other topics, *The Human Condition* does not contain a clear argumentative structure against automation. Most of the objections are related in one way or another. To be able to comment on the general critique of automation and defend the hypothesis, I have isolated the main objections and will discuss these separately. In this process of isolation, the danger of losing small parts of the general critique has been

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid. p. 231.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid. p. 4.

avoided as much as possible. The following quotation gives an idea of Arendt's general critique on automation and the serious language she uses:

The danger of future automation is less the much deplored mechanization and artificialization of natural life than that, its artificiality notwithstanding, all human productivity would be sucked into an enormously intensified life process and would follow automatically, without pain or effort, its ever-recurrent natural cycle. The rhythm of machines would magnify and intensify the natural rhythm of life enormously, but it would not change, only make more deadly, life's chief character with respect to the world, which is to wear down durability.<sup>46</sup>

It is not immediately clear from Arendt's writings what her conception is of automation and what aspects of it endanger the human way of living. Arendt either writes about the dangers of automation itself or about the dangers of the emancipation of labor, which aims at elevating the labor activity itself.<sup>47</sup> The main source of ambiguity is the difference between the conventional conception of the word 'labor' and Arendt's conception of it.

The first argument against automation is the idea that a certain amount of pain is essential in life to enjoy the better moments, and that a laborer without the pain of labor would indulge in endless lifeless consumption. Arendt writes about a cycle prescribed by nature in which men are 'toiling and resting, laboring and consuming, with the same happy and purposeless regularity with which day and night and life and death follow each other'.<sup>48</sup> Pain is part of the game as much as pleasure:

The human condition is such that pain and effort are not just symptoms which can be removed without changing life itself; they are rather the modes in which life itself, together with the necessity to which it is bound, makes itself felt. For mortals, the "easy life of the gods" would be a lifeless life.<sup>49</sup>

A life without toil and trouble would paradoxically 'force one under the yoke of necessity'.<sup>50</sup> Arendt argues that Karl Marx already perceived the link between the absence of hardship in life and the absence of necessity when he insisted that the aim of a revolution must consist in the emancipation of labor, which in turn would result in an emancipation from necessity and consumption. Arendt says that Marx contradicts himself because he defines man as *animal laborans* (and therefore defines man through labor) while he simultaneously longs for a time when man is set free from labor.<sup>51</sup> Referring to the development of automation she worries that 'only the effort of consumption will be left of the "toil and trouble" inherent in the

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid. p. 132.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid. p. 217.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid. p. 106.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid. p. 120.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid. p. 130.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid. p. 104, 130, 131.

biological cycle to whose motor human life is bound' and that there will be a point where 'nearly all human "labor power" is spent in consuming' until 'a mankind altogether "liberated" from the shackles of pain and effort would be free to "consume" the whole world'.<sup>52</sup> This is because 'the spare time of the *animal laborans* is never spent in anything but consumption'.<sup>53</sup> Furthermore, Arendt writes about 'the concomitant serious social problem of leisure', which is 'essentially the problem of how to provide enough opportunity for daily exhaustion to keep the capacity for consumption intact'.<sup>54</sup> The consumption of the world is presumably not a reference to global warming, as the book was written 60 years ago and it is not mentioned elsewhere. Though the connection between automation and global warming would be an interesting one to explore, it is not relevant for the hypothesis.

What is it about automation that troubles Arendt here? She seems to be aiming at the possible threat of mass unemployment as a consequence of automation. This would mean that when Arendt writes about 'the emancipation of labor', she refers to labor in the conventional sense of practicing a job. Or in her words, the activity of labor and work combined. As this will be an important part of the defense of the hypothesis, several arguments to secure this thought are necessary. In the prologue of the book she writes that automation will probably empty the factories within a few decades.<sup>55</sup> When Arendt writes about 'toil and trouble' she might of course be aiming at the typical activities of labor and the emptying of factories could possibly only effect the activity of labor. However, since her main concern seems to be that consumption and finding leisure for daily exhaustion might be the only activities left to do, she must be projecting a world of unemployment. Margaret Canovan, who wrote the introduction to the 1998 edition of *The Human Condition* appears to share this view when writing that Arendt thought automation was causing unemployment.<sup>56</sup> Moreover, Arendt took the term 'emancipation from labor' from Marx, who made no distinction between labor and work. Finally, as has been discussed, one of the main messages of *The Human Condition* is that due to the rise of the social realm we live in a society of laborers. In this modern world, most work is performed in the mode of labor.<sup>57</sup> Consequently, the 'emancipation of labor' - even in Arendt's sense of the word - would at least lead to the disappearance of most jobs.

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid. p. 132, 132.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid. p. 133.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid. p. 131.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid. p. 4.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid. p. x. (introduction by M. Canovan)

<sup>57</sup> Ibid. p. 141.

### *Three tacit assumptions*

The problem Arendt raises contains two parts. The first part being that toil and trouble are necessary parts in life and the second part being that automation ultimately leads men to live under the yoke of necessity and cause men to indulge in endless consumption. Through the discussion of three tacit assumptions the second part of Arendt's problem will be scrutinized first. The next part will be devoted to the second part of Arendt's objection to automation.

The first assumption is that automation will cause large scaled unemployment.<sup>58</sup> Almost 60 years after *The Human Condition* has been published, there is no sign of this. The unemployment rate in the United States, from where she was writing, is more or less the same today (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2017). This is of course not to say that it will always remain like this. Future technological and socio-economic developments are always uncertain. Fear for mass unemployment has been around at least since the industrial revolution and is becoming increasingly common today. Two researchers from Oxford University have even estimated that 47% all jobs in the United States might disappear within several decades (Frey & Osborne, 2013). However, many researchers regard this percentage as either vastly overexaggerated or plainly false. On the other end of the debate, two economists point out in an article of the newspaper *Financieel Dagblad* that automation will make the unemployment rate decrease. According to the article, jobs primarily depend on the supply of labor instead of the demand, which is why the mass influx of women into the job market in the 1980's has not led to a mass reduction of employed men (Smid & Erken, 2016). Thus, while mass unemployment is not an unrealistic scenario for the future, it seems ungrounded to assume that mass unemployment awaits us.

The second assumption Arendt makes is that unemployed people will have the financial means to endlessly consume and make this their sole activity when they are unemployed. In the case of mass unemployment, one can only hope that the unemployed will be able to get a share of the more efficient economy.<sup>59</sup> If the unemployed would not get an form of income, Arendt's prospect might even be a more favorable scenario. It seems plausible however, that the unemployed will at least get the means to supply in their basic needs. Ideas like a negative income tax or an unconditional basic income are increasing in popularity (Van Parijs, 2004). What does not seem likely, is that unemployed people will be able to endlessly consume everything and make this their most important activity.

This brings us to the third assumption, which is the idea that consuming would be the only activity unemployed people would want to engage in. This assumption is more related to

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<sup>58</sup> From the quotes above it is obvious that Arendt is not writing about anything on a small scale. She writes about 'all human productivity', and "'consuming" the whole world'.

<sup>59</sup> The fact workers are being replaced for machines means the machines perform better.

Arendt's general theory, as it originates from the idea that modern society has become a society of laborers in which its members preoccupy themselves with nothing else than the biological necessities in life: laboring and consuming. With labor out of this cycle, consumption is the only activity left to the laborer and 'the more time left to him, the greedier and more craving his appetites'<sup>60</sup>. This belief is akin to anti-consumerism economic theories such as laid out in J.K. Galbraith's *The Affluent Society*, in which he writes about the 'machinery for consumer-demand creation' (Galbraith, 1958). The most basic demands have been met for virtually all Americans. All other demands are being created by an advertising capitalist machinery. The need for a mobile phone only exists when it is created in the first place and advertised to you. There is of course truth in this, but even Galbraith would probably agree that Arendt overexaggerates when stating that consumption would be the only activity the unemployed want to do. What unemployed people would do in a society where automation has replaced most jobs is impossible to say because nothing comparable has ever happened in history. People might spend their time with volunteer work, hobbies or live their lives in a 3D virtual reality world that offers more thrill than the real world (Harari, 2017).

### *Life of the Gods*

While assuming automation would lead to the disappearance of jobs, Arendt points out the dangers of automation by referring to the natural cycle of life of which toil and trouble are an essential element. The condition of human existence 'life itself' is therefore not supposed to come too easy, as it will force people in a life lead by necessity. Mass unemployment (and a redistribution of means) would bring along a society in which people no longer have to worry about survival. One can hardly deny that in a jobless society where 'life itself' is given without exchange for effort, life would be fundamentally different compared to our contemporary society. Ever since *The Human Condition* was published, developments in psychology have demonstrated that a life free of misery simply does not exist. Brickman and Campbell have described this phenomenon as a hedonic treadmill, meaning that human satisfaction tends to revert to a stable level despite a rigorous positive or negative event (Brickman & Campbell, 1971). This would mean Arendt was right when stating that toil and trouble are necessary features of life. However, the fact that people adapt to their situation would also mean the toil and trouble essentially cannot be taken away and are therefore unavoidable. Just because it is no longer necessary to work in a factory all day to pay the bills, doesn't mean all toil and trouble in life has disappeared. The question remains why toil and trouble, or the inherent hardship in life, should be a result of sustaining life itself, and cannot be a result of the pursuit for the highest possible goal that runs through the book like a red thread: immortality. Instead of laboring for a means to live, automation may offer a life in which people can spend their time

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid. p. 133.

creating durable worldly objects such as paintings, write books or people can more actively engage in politics. In fact, this is exactly what the men of the *polis* did, who 'felt it necessary to possess slaves because of the slavish nature of all occupations that served the needs for the maintenance of life'.<sup>61</sup> These men preferred worldly activities such as engagement in politics, being heard on the marketplace or going to the theatre. Automation has the potential to realize this highest goal without forcing people into labor and without excluding all women.

### *A society of work and action*

In the section called 'a society of laborers' we have seen that Arendt holds that automation, together with the division of labor, has led to an unlimited accumulation of wealth. This caused a problem for the animal laborans that consequently started to treat all use objects (products of work) as though they were consumer goods (products of labor). So not only is most work performed in the mode of labor, the products of work are also treated as products of labor. Put in terms of the corresponding conditions of human existence, people are occupied too much with life itself at the expense of worldly activities. Automation seems to solve this problem because it takes over the activity of labor, allowing people to concentrate on higher activities than sustaining life in the most efficient way. For Arendt, it doesn't work out like that because we are mostly *animal laborans* that rely on and define ourselves through labor. Any activity unrelated to making a living is essentially a worldless hobby.<sup>62</sup> Labor and consumption are the two stages through which the cycle of biological life must pass.<sup>63</sup> If labor is removed from this equation, *animal laborans* compensates by increasing consumption.

Arendt thus poses a major problem of modern society. However, people have gotten attached to the activity of labor in such a way that it would be even worse if you tried to improve it. Arendt has demonstrated clearly in her book that societies change and adjust to new circumstances. Arendt continuously refers to ancient Greece and writes about the differences with Roman, Middle Age and modern society. All different societies that gradually converged or evolved out of each other and conditioned its citizens. Given that humans adapt to their society, what needs to be demonstrated to show that automation does not form a threat to the way humans live, is that automation causes a positive rather than a negative change to society. In order to form an answer to the hypothesis, it needs to be clear on what basis this value judgement can be made.

The pursuit of Immortality, either through durable objects or through the activity of action, is the most cherished value. The realization of the potential for action is arguably the most important theme of the book. In any case, it is the 'spring and center of the *vita activa*'.

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid. p. 83.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid. p. 118.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid. p. 131.

According to Arendt the current predicament lies in the absence or shortage of work and action in the *vita activa*. The sections above have tried to demonstrate that laborers both cannot and do not want to indulge in endless consumption and that automation thus has the potential to bring work and action back in the *vita activa*. Furthermore, we have seen that the initial problem that made us into a consumer society was the rise of the social realm, or the disappearance of the boundaries between the private and public sphere. Labor is being exercised out in the open instead of within the confinements of the household. This led to action being intertwined with the need to preserve life. The presence of necessity in the public realm makes it impossible to act in freedom. The point Arendt makes in this is that you can only speak of an act of action when it is an end in itself. Being heard in a public debate is thus only an act of action if it is done for the sake of expressing an opinion and being heard. Any 'hidden agenda' for the lower goal of meeting biological necessities relegates action into conformist behavior, which is partly what defines *animal laborans*. Is Arendt's point accurate? Are human beings able to politically act beyond their more animal needs and wishes? Following Schopenhauer's theory of the will to life or Nietzsche's theory of the will to power, a political act would never be an end in itself, but rather a more sophisticated way of meeting necessities inherent in 'life itself'. However, staying in line with Arendt's framework of thought, an act of action would be an end in itself as long as it is separated from any act adhering to 'life itself'. As Arendt associates automation with unemployment and a redistribution of wealth, I would argue that it is more plausible that automation takes care of biological necessities and thus enables the potential for action.

## Part 4. Conclusion and final thoughts

In *The Human Condition*, Arendt has created a normative framework of the *vita activa* in which labor, work and action each play an important part. While strictly speaking only the latter mode of active engagement gives the book its political identity, the discussion of how all three must be balanced, relates to the socio-economic structure of society. Essential in this are the conditions of human existence, i.e. life itself, worldliness, plurality, natality, mortality and (though left out of the discussion) the earth. The first three relate to the three modes of active engagement and I have argued that natality and mortality relate to the ultimate goal of immortality. Though death is one of the few certainties in life, Arendt argues that this, in a sense, can be overcome either by leaving your mark with durable objects that are made in worldly mode of work or through 'great words and deeds' in the mode of action. As the issue at stake is the human condition and not human nature, the importance of the three main activities vary over the ages. While in the ancient Greek polis the activity of labor was despised

because of its slavish nature, the *animal laborans* that inhabit today's society know of nothing else. The precious demarcation between the private and public realm got diluted by the arrival of the social realm, resulting in labor being displayed in the open and interfering with typical activities of action, which rely on the absence of necessity. *Animal laborans* lives according to a natural life cycle of laboring and consuming, pain and joy. According to Arendt, automation is one of the main causes of this modern predicament and will even worsen it when it causes unemployment. Labor provides the necessary toil and trouble inherent in the life cycle, and the absence of it will cause the animal laborans to indulge in endless consumption; the only activity left to do. I have aimed at defending the hypothesis '*building on Arendt's conception of the human condition, automation does not form a threat to society*', by showing that Arendt makes three dubious assumptions in her claim that automation will eventually cause people to endlessly consume. The most important in this is the assumption that automation will cause mass unemployment. Furthermore, I have argued that the toil and trouble inherent in the cycle of life are unavoidable and in any case not exclusive features of the activity of labor. Upholding immortality as the highest goal of the members of a society and, like Arendt, assuming that automation will bring unemployment and a redistribution of means, automation has the potential to realize this ideal by allowing people to exchange their time spent in labor for work or action. This essentially makes machines the modern variant of the slaves in ancient Greece who allowed the men of the *polis* to engage in higher activities. This is possible because of the fact that societies get used to their conditions. Finally, automation may undo the interference of labor with the public realm, which is the root of the predicament of modern society. With 'life itself' given in an automated society, people will not be necessitated to pursue interests related to this condition and be able to engage in work or action as an end in itself. This allows people to pursue the highest possible goal in the *vita activa* in all freedom.

By writing this thesis, I do not claim to know what the future of technology or economics looks like. If anything, I have tried to emphasize the fundamentally unpredictable nature of technological developments and their pervasive influence on virtually all aspects of society. It is in fact this notion that made me skeptical of Arendt's view on technological developments and, above all, automation. In my view, any prediction about future technology and its effects on society requires a thorough analysis of possible outcomes, accompanied by serious reservations. The determination and certainty with which Arendt writes about automation was the foremost reason to scrutinize her thoughts on this concern. This thesis is therefore merely an attempt to demonstrate the possibility of an alternative (and more optimistic) future scenario. Staying within Arendt's philosophical framework allowed to point a possible alternative scenario without ignoring the more valuable lessons laid out in *The Human Condition*.

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