

# Hannah Arendt's Devaluation of Life?

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The fact that so many of you are here today to celebrate this centenary indicates that despite her death over thirty years ago Hannah Arendt is alive and well, at least, in academic discourse. There are many indices of this vitality. At a conference I attended last year, the present Hannah Arendt Professor of Philosophy at the New School, Agnes Heller, told me that she had already been invited to three centenary events for this year; the ongoing publication of fragments from Arendt's papers, the amazing proliferation of secondary studies on just about all aspects of her work in the last twenty years and frequent citations in a range of contemporary journals, all demonstrate the robust good health of Arendt's legacy. This is no small achievement for the émigré Jewess who arrived in New York in 1940 without English, who at that time had decided to distance herself from the whole academic business, who consequently largely went her own way without fixed institutional affiliation, who avoided the great ideological camps of the Cold War, who found it difficult to locate herself on the political spectrum and established no school to consecrate her memory.

Others have provided convincing cultural explanations of Arendt's avid contemporary reception and I do not intend to add to their analysis on this occasion.<sup>2</sup> Today I want to turn to one of the most mentioned, but least studied, concepts in her thought – that is her concept of life. In Arendt's typology of human activities: action, work, labour and the conditions to which they correspond: plurality, worldliness and life, it is really the condition of life that has received the least attention. This is not surprising. As far as

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<sup>1</sup> I would like to dedicate this paper to the memory of my father Jack Grumley.

<sup>2</sup> Heller, A. 'Why Hannah Arendt Now?'

Arendt was concerned, in the modern productivist, consumerist world everything associated with "life" had too high a priority. On the other hand, action and work, which for her underwrote plurality and worldliness, had become endangered species and she felt it was her task to ring the alarm bells. To her way of thinking, the Western tradition from the time of Plato had devalued politics and the philosophical preference for contemplation and knowledge (episteme) had usurped the classical Greek priority for action, plurality and opinion. In this light, it was only understandable that she directed most of her critical energies to the reanimation of action, and the celebration of opinion and plurality in political thought. The survival of individual action and plurality within a humanly habitable world required that the domination of labour and life be registered and resisted. With its implicit commitment to equally bankrupt philosophies of history the Cold War seemed to vindicate her judgement that modern politics was trapped in a glacial impasse of ideologies. In this light, her critique of the society of consumption, of the worship of jobholding and labour had a freshness and relevance that still bites in the era of neo-liberalism. My object today is not to overturn Arendt's legitimate political priorities but only to shed some light on the assumptions that underpin her understanding of the concept of life and to look briefly at some alternative options.

### **1. Critique of the Philosophical Tradition**

Despite her classical philosophical training with Heidegger and Jaspers in the late twenties, Arendt embraced marginality. Her critique of the tradition for its neglect of politics was so emphatic, her diagnosis of the crisis of tradition so deep, her contempt for contemporary Anglo-American philosophy so trenchant that for a long time she preferred to be described as a "political theorist". At that time it served her purposes to play the iconoclast. In an interview for German television in 1964 with Günter Gaus when he describes her amongst "the circle philosophers", she replies: "I'm afraid I have to protest. I do not belong to the circle of philosophers."

My profession, if you can even speak of it at all, is political theory.<sup>3</sup> I neither feel like a philosopher, nor do I believe that I have been accepted in the circle of philosophers ..." When Gaus pressed her by saying: "I consider you to be a philosopher", Arendt replies: "Well I can't help that, but in my opinion I am not. I have said good-bye to philosophy once and for all".<sup>4</sup> It matters little that Arendt latter softened this self-imposed exile and was prepared to re-enter "the circle of philosophers" nor that not all contemporary philosophers, like Isaiah Berlin, might welcome her with open arms into that circle, nor does it matter whether we judge this earlier reluctance to be a strategic and contextual decision in the face of the then existing philosophical climate or merely the expression of Arendt's personal idiosyncrasy and theatricality. The more substantial point was that she saw a deep historical tension between philosophy and politics that went back to the founders of the Western tradition; philosophy had built its empire in a defensive reaction against the dangers of engulfment by politics. Arendt took it upon herself to expose this tension and rehabilitate some of what she believed were the essential realities of political life that had been ignored by the tradition in its willingness to distance itself from the city and politics. She never tired of reiterating this point because it is a substantial part of her claim to originality in political philosophy.<sup>5</sup> However, its relevance for the present paper lies only in the extent to which it impinges on her analysis of the concept of life. It is my contention that in this respect Arendt remained an exemplary Platonian. When it came to understanding life, she is quite happy to endorse Platonic dualism. Despite her otherwise emphatically anti-Platonic imagination, she follows his path of ascension out of the

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<sup>3</sup> Ira Katznelson, *Desolation and Enlightenment* (Columbia University Press, New York, 2003).

<sup>4</sup> "What Remains? The Language Remains: A Conversation with Günter Gaus" in *The Portable Hannah Arendt* (Ed) Baehr, P. Penguin Books, New York, 2000, pp2-3.

<sup>5</sup> On this point Richard Bernstein comments: 'From the 1930's on, Arendt returned over and over again to the battle between philosophy and politics. She was acutely aware of the tendency of philosophers and "pure thinkers" to turn away (and to denigrate) the confused contingency of brute political realities. Unlike Heidegger, this is a danger to which she never succumbed.' 'Provocation and Appropriation: Arendt's Response to Heidegger' in *Confronting Mass Democracy and Industrial Technology* (Ed) McCormick John P, Duke University Press, Durham, 2002, pp.295-318.

darkness of family life and the cave;<sup>6</sup> she associates the space of political action with the light of the day, and this implicit devaluation of mere life and its everyday reproduction which she shares with the tradition introduces an awkward ambivalence into her credentials as a true philosophical renegade.

## **2. The Hierarchy of Activities**

It is well known that the framework for Arendt's reconstruction of the activities of the human condition is derived from the ancient lifeworld. Arendt returns to the hierarchical order of the *vita activa* ignoring its philosophical reworking in favour of philosophical contemplation. While contemplation was the province of a philosophical elite, the other activities - labour, work and action - are general human capacities that all humans participate in to varying degrees. As part of her project to rehabilitate politics, Arendt allegedly wanted to avoid the biases of the philosophical founders and shared Heidegger's conviction that historical layers of meaning had obscured the fundamental ontological insights encoded in the original ancient languages. With this deliberately incomplete framework Arendt hoped to see modern experience through a critical lens informed by the whole tradition.

Her contention is that the activities of labour, work and action constitute the human world. Each activity has an indispensable role to play in human life while all are interdependent. Thus labour sustains life, work builds the durable human artifice and action gives form to individual identity. Yet without labour and the reproduction of life neither work nor action would be possible, while work and action provide a world and a meaning that makes human life something different from the mere circularity of biological process. Despite this interdependence, the distinctiveness of each activity is at the heart of Arendt's diagnosis of modern ills. She is at pains to stress that aims and standards of one specific activity cannot be willy-nilly applied to the domain of another

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<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p.6.

without courting disaster. Thus the modern tendency to take the standards and criteria of labour and apply them in the domains of action and work might lead to an uninhabitable and characterless world dominated by processuality and behaviour. Yet, while Arendt wants to recognise the fundamental importance of each of these activities, she also underlines that they are not equally human in terms of value. She confirms the value hierarchy of the ancients by ordering the activities in terms of the degree of freedom they entail and the sense of a distinctive human reality they confirmed.<sup>7</sup> This is why labour, so integral of the reproduction of life and its requirements, is located at the bottom of the value hierarchy: it is governed by necessity; work, which creates the distinctive and durably human environment responds to needs but ones that are not as urgent as biological compulsion; action is the most valuable because in giving an individual stamp to achievement and creating meaning it most expresses freedom. In all this, Arendt's critical purpose is obvious. She goes on to argue that the value hierarchy that has guided Western civilisation since at least the Greeks has been rapidly overturned by modernity's re-evaluation of all values, with consequences that can ultimately only be guessed but that deserve more contemporary critical reflection.

What I have said so far is likely known to most of you at least in broad outline. Now I want to concentrate my reconstruction on Arendt analysis of the concept of life to see how this functions in her programme for the reanimation of political theory.

### **3. The Concept of Life**

In conventional English usage the concept of life has two distinct meanings that are reproduced in Arendt's analysis. She distinguishes between an individual life and organic nature as a whole. The former, which she designates with the Aristotelian term *bios*, is an appearance in the human world that designates an

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<sup>7</sup> Parekh, B. 'Hannah Arendt's Critique of Marx' *Hannah Arendt: The Recovery of the Public World* (Ed) Hill, M.A. St Martins Press, New York, 1970, pp. 70-72.

interval of time between life and death that follows a strictly linear movement. The specifically human life is always full of events, can be told as a biographical story and is "somehow a kind of praxis'. The latter, *zoë* refers to organic nature in its eternal circularity that knows neither birth nor death in this specifically human sense.<sup>8</sup> On the one hand, Arendt wants to emphasise that the former life, inhabiting the humanly constructed artifice of the world and characterised as it is by words and deeds, is, in its directionality and rhythms, anti-natural, and more than mere organic life. Yet, at the same time, she is only too aware that this is at least in part illusory. Linear biography is also subject to the growth and decay of nature's cyclical movement; the biological processes of bodily function have an urgency and repetition that hems in the *bios* both from within and without, and from which there is no escape except death.<sup>9</sup> Thus, the human metabolic exchange with nature is a moment within the greater cosmic processes of natural organic circularity.

What human beings share with all other forms of life is the most powerful drive that comes from life itself to transform the nature around them into a form that allows them to subsist. This is why Arendt says, "The human condition of labour is life itself".<sup>10</sup> In a deliberately paradoxical formulation she argues that the institution of slavery in antiquity was not devised for cheap labour or as an instrument of profit but as an attempt to exclude from the human condition what humans share with all other forms of animal life.<sup>11</sup> That is to eliminate labour from the truly human condition. Interestingly, while Arendt is typically wary of all modern phantasies that "everything is possible", she views the Greek efforts along these lines as an expression of the highest human nobility whereas its consequences for the slaves passes without censure.

Life is only sustained by the two stage process of labour and consumption where labour obtains from the superabundance of nature the means which are constantly consumed and in need of

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<sup>8</sup> Arendt, H. *The Human Condition*, HB&J, New York, 1958, p.97.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p.98.

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

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p.84.

replenishment.<sup>12</sup> This labouring activity of destructive transformation, of gathering and mixing with the things of nature is a form of devouring that foreshadows the bodies' process of nourishment. The implacable repetition and circularity of this process of mere subsistence signifies its futility. Not only does it command us with irresistible necessity; it possesses no purpose beyond the necessity from which it issues. It is precisely these qualities of necessity and futility that, to Arendt's mind, mark consumption and labour as the most inappropriate pinnacle of modern priorities and preferences. Rather than a measure of the achievement of our human nature, they seem to underscore human imprisonment in an overarching natural processuality that repudiates all distinction.

One of the strongest tendencies in Arendt's reconstruction of the human condition is the distance she introduces between life and the highest human attainments. Thus in a slight but significant deviation from Aristotle, the words and deeds that characterise human life are not viewed as the defining natural attributes of human nature, but as those capacities by which humans are definitively distinguished from nature. Another expression of this distance is the confinement of life to the household and the domain of privacy. Whereas for the Greeks the highest achievements of action must have a public profile and be performed before an audience of equals, life and its necessities are isolated within the *oikos*. The appropriateness of this confinement is registered in Arendt's discussion of the non-privative dimensions of privacy. A life confined to the household is a deprivation because it would exclude a Greek citizen from the highest things: the public realm of freedom and association with his peers. Nevertheless, the necessity that the citizen must avoid to partake of the highest activities has a compulsion that cannot be denied. As we have already seen, an unmatched urgency attends to the necessities of life. The abatement of this urgency is one of the functions of the private sphere. Without the property to satisfy daily needs, the public domain can be of no

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<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p.99.

use. However, the functionality of household is not exhausted in being the foundation of higher activity and achievement. Despite her own celebrity, Arendt was a very private person who knew that a life spent entirely in public becomes shallow.<sup>13</sup> The life of perpetual visibility lacks the quality "of rising into sight from some darker ground which must remain hidden".<sup>14</sup> Here Arendt seems to suggest the intimate connection between freedom and necessity, a homeostasis of human striving in which energies and strengths are only nurtured beyond public attention.

Arendt assures us that the existence and importance of this non-privative dimension of the household has always been known.<sup>15</sup> The distinction between private and public also expressed an ancient demarcation between things that should be shown and those that should be hidden.<sup>16</sup> Here again the category of life is the lynchpin on which everything turns. Those things that were connected to the bodily part of human existence, to the life process itself and the survival of the species were hidden away. The labour, pain, suffering, urgency, uniformity and futility connected with life were best confined to the darkness. And even if the modern age no longer believes that bodily functions and material concerns should be out of sight, it is still the case that the few remnants of strict privacy still evident in our civilization relate to their intimate connection to life and the body.<sup>17</sup>

#### **4. Life and History**

We have already noted that one of the features of Arendt's philosophical reconstruction of human activities is a desire for historical perspective and an open-endedness that celebrates the human capacity for creation and innovation. She wants to register the crisis of the modern age and critically assess the rise of the social

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<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p.71.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p.72.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p.73.



and its resulting triumph of labour and consumption on a scale wrought from the whole Western civilizatory achievement. However, her realisation of this aim introduces a certain theoretical tension into her treatment of the category of life. By its very character the phenomenon of life seems to be almost beyond history. In a very interesting short paper *On the Human Condition* for the first Annual Conference on the Cybercultural Revolution in 1966<sup>18</sup> Arendt notes that, despite the industrial revolution, life and labour remained much as they had always been. In certain ways both were made easier, but they both still consumed at least the same amount of time in the life of the individual.<sup>19</sup> While the result of work and labour changed dramatically, the cycle of living and labouring, of periods of exhaustion and recovery changed hardly at all. Arendt reminds us that we need to view the exceptionality of the Greek achievement against the priority accorded to life cycle by the large majority of mankind (sic):<sup>20</sup>

The Greeks believed – and many amongst us believe – that it is not enough to labor in order to live, and to live in order to labor. But however highly we regard the Greeks – and I regard them highly indeed – the large majority of mankind has always lived in the mere survival cycle which offered a certain contentment and certain rewards from the bliss of seeing one's children, and one's grandchildren, grow to maturity. From the life cycle – the simple things – most men have gained their rewards, in that they saw their purpose.

Yet, all of this suddenly changed with the new challenges presented by the contemporary world. Arendt now envisages the reversal of the traditional social pyramid where the many would work for the leisure of the few. The enormous potential opened up by

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<sup>18</sup>Arendt, H. 'On the Human Condition' in *The Evolving Society: First Annual Conference on the Cybercultural Revolution – Cybernetics and Automation* ICP Press, New York, 1966.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p.215.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p.216.

technological advance, automation and cybernetics mandates not only that now the few will work for the many, but that those of higher social status will now toil as hard as slaves ever toiled in the worst eras of history.<sup>21</sup> The novel problem that seemed to be emerging in the sixties with the dynamics of the modern social world was the tragedy of vacant time for the masses. Here Arendt's analysis turns on a distinction between leisure and idleness. The *bios theoretikos* had taken for granted the desirability of leisure. Arendt charged that the philosophical suspicion against politics was fuelled by the fear that it would undermine or impinge on the time allocated to the philosophical life. This leisure (*skhōe*) is understood as "abstention from certain activities to be free for something else".<sup>22</sup> Idleness, on the other hand, is both ugly and frightening. Its ugliness lies in a potentially catastrophic breakdown in the life rhythm of labouring and living, exhaustion and recovery so integral to the cycle and tempo of life. It is frightening because the political instability of the Roman Republic was associated with the idleness of the plebs. In conditions of complete freedom, the aristocrats of the past maintained a rigid code of discipline to ward off their deterioration. The plebs, on the other hand, had no meaningful activity to engage their energies and sought distraction and satisfaction wherever they could find it.<sup>23</sup> One does not have to endorse Arendt's reading of the decline of the Roman Republic to accept that this analysis locates a serious problem that, while it has assumed a different shape in the harsh climate of neo-liberalism, has still not found a ready solution.

This problem has both moral and political dimensions. Deeply rooted in our Christian culture is the link between maintenance and labour that now seemed, from a technological standpoint, historically obsolete.<sup>24</sup> In closing, Arendt offers an alternative new precept: "He who does not spend energy, shall not be able to sleep", yet this seems more a physiological truism than a moral maxim. Her

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<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 'On the Human Condition'.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p.217.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p.219.

political solution to the problem of vacant time is no more reassuring: the reorientation of the contemporary liberal democratic life towards political activity on the model of the polis and the replacement of vacant time with public service.<sup>25</sup> This conclusion sits oddly with her well-known view that political life is not for everyone and that a more participatory democratic model would foster a self-selecting political elite. This final flourish therefore leaves the problem of vacant time for the great majority in mass society unsolved.

However, this paper registers a gradual evolution in Arendt's thinking in the post-war years in diagnosing the likely ills to flow from the modern domination of the values of life and labour. Beginning with totalitarianism, she moves from consumer society and the society of jobholders, on to automation and the problem of vacant time. But behind each of these appearances is a single problem complex: the modern worldview that favours labour and life. The intimate connection between life and necessity means that the urgency manifest in life is not constrained by the apathy that in the past inflicted wealthy societies. In the case of the democratic liberal West, the "unnatural growth of the natural" has created conditions of such abundance and technological achievement that necessity itself seems to be disappearing. However, the result of this is not the establishment of freedom but the "blurring of the distinguishing line between freedom and necessity" where the latter is mistaken for the former.<sup>26</sup> This blurring threatens not only the initiative required by freedom but even the homeostasis of mass human life, of exhaustion and recovery, of aspiration against resistance.

Leaving aside the general adequacy of this diagnosis I want to now focus on a fundamental tension in Arendt's approach. Her preference for the framework of the human condition derived from an explicit acknowledgement that human beings are always conditioned but are not reducible to that conditioning and also

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<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> Arendt, H. *The Human Condition op. cit.*, p.71.

capable of creativity and initiation. Yet, these insights make little impression on the way she constructs her concept of life. Here she is content to take over the classical understanding of labour as drudgery and life as the eternal circle of nature. While history does impact on these categories, changing their evaluation and creating new problems, the categories themselves seem almost beyond history in their essential meaning. What makes this feature of her thinking so perplexing is her already noted iconoclasm. On the one side, she is only too willing to chastise the classical tradition for its failure to come to grips with the essential ingredients of political life; on the other, she obediently makes it's understanding of both life and labour her own in adopting a *sub specia aeternitas* view of both categories.

Whether or not this criticism bites really depends on the possibility of an alternative understanding of these categories. Marxist criticism of Arendt's distinction between labour and work has already been argued extensively in the literature so I will not review it here. However, as things are not so clear in regard to the concept of life, I will explore it a little further. To demonstrate alternative options I will look briefly at the concept of life in the work of Michel Foucault and W. G. Sebald.

## 5. Life as Bio-politics

The place of the concept of life in Foucault's work is fairly well known. He analyses it under the rubric "bio-power", which he understands, along with disciplinary power, as the two key ingredients of a new configuration of power that emerges in early modernity. He was also prompted to dismiss the traditional philosophical checklist of eternal questions and look more closely at historical practices and their theoretical reflection. Accordingly, he offers a radically historical account of this new power constellation and the new political rationality designated: "reasons of state".<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Foucault, M. 'The Political Technology of Individuals' in *Technologies of the Self: A Seminar with Michel Foucault* (Ed) Martin, L., Gutman, H. & Hutton, P. University of Massachusetts Press, Amherst, 1988.

This latter orientation to political thinking leaves behind the old questions of the "best state", or of the appropriate relation between prince and people to focus on the nature of the newly emergent modern state.<sup>28</sup> This state is viewed as a constellation of forces, a natural object, constituted from an irreducible multiplicity of individuals, whose immanent strengths can be either advanced or weakened by governments. Furthermore, this natural entity finds itself in permanent competition with other states within the horizon of a limited history.<sup>29</sup>

From this perspective, the task of politics is no longer confined to questions of law but must turn its attention to new questions of a specifically modern order: all the behaviour of the individual – what they do, their life, death, work and individual morality – is relevant insofar as it impacts on the strength of the state.<sup>30</sup> Even their happiness is not an end but as an instrument towards strengthening the state. The new political rationality has a technique fitting for this task: the police. While its task – ensuring public health, food, housing, production, fair markets and general co-existence – appears mainly administrative, the new doctrine interprets it positively as concerned with the active and productive aspects of life. This makes sense because its object is very comprehensive – the indispensable, the useful and the superfluous – ultimately life itself.<sup>31</sup> Everything that fosters the lives of the citizens and the strength of the state falls into its province. In a striking formulation, Foucault tells us that the new rationality wields its power "over living beings, as living beings and its politics therefore, has to be a bio-politics".<sup>32</sup>

There can be no question as to Arendt's awareness of the facts that constitute the substance of Foucault's reconstruction of bio-politics. It is symptomatic that the statistics, which he views as the

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<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p.150.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p.152.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p.157.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p.160.

political arithmetic of this new rationality,<sup>33</sup> are, for Arendt, the currency of the new behavioural sciences that exemplify the disappearance of action and the authentically political from the modern world. The difference between these two perspectives is that Foucault is not content to leave the category of life as the index of the ultimate futility of human life and merely the necessary condition of politics, which it then leaves to the realm of eternal darkness. Although equally critical of many of the developments associated with the new political rationality, he sees that in this new constellation the meaning of the category of life has been radically inflected in a way that delivered it an entirely new semantic range. In the new lexicon of politics the category of life has a fundamentally new meaning, which associates it inextricably with productivity and politics. Foucault's assault on the political tradition involves a radical historicisation of a whole constellation of categories and questions. Careful investigation of historical sources reveals a rupture that infuses the concepts of power, revolution and life with a new content and potential unacknowledged by the tradition.

On this reading, Arendt's interpretation of life seems too indebted to traditional philosophical dualism. Her distinction between individual life and organic nature as a whole reproduces the Platonism that she otherwise rejects. She views organic nature as the inescapable condition of individual life but this remains a merely cyclical and ultimately futile foundation were it not for the added value that derives from another ontological order: the narrative *bios* rich in events, actions and meaning. Here Arendt reveals her emphatic humanist credentials:<sup>34</sup>

I am very much inclined to say that human beings – conditioned beings as they are by definition – can indeed adjust voluntarily and speedily. Man (sic) is not merely conditioned by his environment; he conditions the environment, and the environment then

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<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p.151.

<sup>34</sup> Arendt, A. 'On the Human Condition' *op. cit.*, p.218.

conditions him in turn ... Man has always adjusted to new conditions more speedily than he thinks himself capable of doing.

## 6. Creaturely Life in the Prism of Natural History

At this juncture I want to introduce another concept of life associated with the German novelist W. G. (Max) Sebald. This conception of life has been called "creaturely life" by Eric Santner who associates it with a predominately Jewish tradition that goes back to Rosenzweig, Benjamin and Adorno.<sup>35</sup> He explains that this understanding of life refers to the peculiar proximity of the human to the animal at the point of their radical difference. Especially at the point where the normal run of social and political life is exposed to traumatic transformation and violence under conditions of modernity, a new dimension of creaturely human existence is called into being. Here the dual possibilities of life as normative structure and suffering, natural organism and mute relic co-exist. Sebald relies explicitly on the idea of natural history associated with Benjamin. Natural history has to do with the breakdown and reification of meaning in human life. It entails not only that nature has a history but more that the artefacts of human history acquire the characteristics of natural being at the juncture where they begin to lose their place in a viable form of life.<sup>36</sup> But the inherent duality involved in these traumatic crises and repetitious cycles of emergence and decay mean that the demise of a human "second nature" can also be experienced as a denaturalisation, transformation into a mere ruin of historical being.<sup>37</sup> For Santner, the creaturely dimension of human beings refers not simply to the fact that we are just one creature amongst others, or that we share with them animal suffering but that we are more creaturely in virtue of an excess

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<sup>35</sup> Santner, Eric. J. *On Creaturely Life* University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2006, p. 12.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p.16.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p.17.

produced in the space of the political that, paradoxically, accounts for our humanity.<sup>38</sup>

Amongst the many employments of these ideas in the novels and essays of W G Sebald, one instance is his Zurich lectures later published as *On the Natural History of Destruction*.<sup>39</sup> These lectures address the issue of the saturation air raids over Germany towards the end of the Second World War and, specifically, the surprising reluctance of German post-war literature to give expression to the widespread social devastation and trauma involved. However, Sebald's interest in this episode goes far beyond the obvious strategic and moral questions raised by total war. For him, what is involved here is a question of an entire cultural logic:<sup>40</sup>

So much intelligence, capital and labour went into the planning of such destruction that under the pressure of all the accumulated potential, it had to happen in the end.

And this realisation requires a fundamental change of perspective: "the autonomy of mankind in the face of the real or potential destruction that it has caused is no greater in the history of the species than the autonomy of the animal in the scientist's cage".<sup>41</sup> At the point where culture has turned into rubble amidst the ruins of the German cities, Sebald finds the signature of a collective catastrophe where history threatens to revert to natural history.<sup>42</sup> Behind the immediate catastrophic episode is a putative deeper malaise at the level of human anthropogenesis that he supposes may just be an "evolutionary mistake". He explicitly evokes Benjamin's *angel of history* whose face is turned not to the future but to the past and who, where we perceive a chain of events, "sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage" while the storm we call "progress" is caught in his wings propelling

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<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 26.

<sup>39</sup> Sebald, W.G. *On the Natural History of Destruction* Hamish Hamilton, London, 2003.

<sup>40</sup> Sebald, W.G. *Campo Santo* Hamish Hamilton, London, 2005, p.97.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, p.95.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, p.85.



him blindly backwards.<sup>43</sup> The wide-eyed stare and open mouth of this angel is likely an effort to bear witness to this cumulative creaturely suffering.

Another key motif of the natural history perspective in an image taken over via Kluge from Marx: the history of industry being the open book of human thought and feelings.<sup>44</sup> In an ironic twist to the materialist thesis that production as revealed in industry is the essence of man (sic) and the engine room of his autonomous history, it is retorted that the overwhelming destruction of the air raids is a "kind of experiment" anticipating the point where we "shall drop out of what we have thought so long to be our autonomous history and back into the history of nature".<sup>45</sup> Yet, it still remains true that the enormous suffering entailed has been absorbed into the lived space, and lies deposited and manifest in the ash, dusts and ruins of the perpetrating social objectivity.

Sebald attributes the failure of the initial post-war writers to capture this traumatic experience to the "internal emigrants' reliance on vague notions of freedom and the humanist inheritance of the West in endless and prolix abstractions".<sup>46</sup> The elements of a more aesthetically compelling and morally trenchant approach appeared only later in the work of Kluge who adopts an indirect method of research into the past. The rapidity of the destruction and its overwhelming scale defied immediate comprehension: learning was only really possible retrospectively, from subsequent reports.<sup>47</sup> The demand for the more detached standpoint of natural history was bolstered by its avoidance of the compromises and illusions still clinging to humanist narrative. The natural scientific observer maintains an essential distance: Kluge notices that despite the obliteration and silence of the ruins, fires are still burning in the cellars and "after a few days paths bearing some relation to the old road network are trodden over", the "activity of many crawling

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<sup>43</sup> Sebald, W.G. *On the Natural History of Destruction* op. cit., p.68.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, p.67.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>46</sup> Sebald, W.G. *On the Natural History of Destruction* op. cit., p. 9.

<sup>47</sup> Sebald, W.G. *Camp Santo* op. cit., p.90.

creatures".<sup>48</sup> A vantage point above the destruction suggests the inevitable return of the disastrous old ways and behaviour. But Sebald leaves us guessing whether we are witnessing just another episode in the cycle of organic life or another recidivist calamity in the history of human autonomy. There can be little doubt that he views the tension derived from the simultaneous switch between the perspectives of history and nature as the most effective aesthetic realisation and moral register of the uniqueness of this concrete event. He employs such switch images throughout his work to capture the more profound mystery of life. One need only recall the image of the North Sea gradually reclaiming the 19th century industry and towns of the coastal regions of East Anglia as they slowly subside into the mud to rejoin nature in *The Rings of Saturn*.<sup>49</sup> We can only guess that to his mind even Arendt's constrained humanism, which has dispatched the megalomaniac dreams of the Nazis and underscored the conditionality of human life in the web of relations both social and natural, is not sufficiently free of illusions and complicity to serve contemporary critical purposes. Sebald's own melancholic acts of testimony and memory are not politics but a literary project of community where chance encounters with the creaturely dimension of the neighbour propel the dynamic of knowledge and the possibility of moral resistance to such misfortune.

## Conclusion

In this paper I have tried to bring a critical focus to the relatively neglected concept of life in Arendt's work. However, before summarising my predominantly critical conclusions I want to echo Arendt's own preface to her own critical remarks on Marx in *The Human Condition* with its homage both to his greatness and the rich bounty he had provided for others.

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<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>49</sup> Sebald, W.G. *The Rings of Saturn*. New Directions, New York, 1998.

We have already seen that her severe repudiation of the classical tradition in political thought did not stop her endorsing the ancient devaluation of mere life. If anything, her rendering of the distinction between *bios* and *zoë* is even sharper than that found in Aristotle insofar as she defines the human achievement in opposition to the life of nature, which is characterised primarily by its futility. I am not the first to raise critical objections to Arendt's conceptual distinctions and her desire to cast them as sure and immovable markers of profound political truths. Those familiar with the literature would be well aware of the critique of her distinction between the social and the political. Many feel that it fails to capture the essential fluidity that reigns in the migration of issues and topics between the social and the political. It seems to me that Arendt's interpretation of life suffers from a similar deficiency. Her reading of the concept of life is almost beyond history. And while few would argue that biological life seems relatively immune from the vicissitudes so common to the domain of human action, it still cannot be completely divorced from it. The introduction of the alternative understandings of the concept of life in the work of Foucault and Sebald was intended to illustrate this point. Foucault interprets the concept of life like any other, demonstrating how the profound changes that gave rise to what he called the disciplinary society also impacted on both our understanding and evaluation of life. In the framework of bio-politics, life could not remain solely in the domain of the private under the designation of futility but had to be accorded a public profile and a higher priority in explicitly political thinking. While Foucault demonstrates the possibility of inflecting the concept of life from the perspective of history, Sebald cautions against excessive historicisation of life. The natural history perspective provides a cautionary detachment from the illusions of human autonomy and the potential to capture the particular and concrete in its multiple shades and signification. The concept of life that emerges from Sebald's elegiac prose is not the mere processuality and futility that exhausts Arendt's reflective humanist reading of it but something more mysterious, more creaturely in both senses of this word. Her iconoclastic critique of the Western

tradition should not deceive us: Arendt is still the bearer of a post-Second World War western cultural confidence that in Sebald, writing at the end of the 20th century, has reached its nadir. If we needed more evidence that a new spirit surrounds the question of life we need not look further than Giorgio Agamben's recent injunction in *The Open* (2004) that it "is more urgent to work on the divisions, to ask in what way - within man (sic) - has man separated from non-man, and the animal from the human, than it is to take positions on the great issues, on so-called human rights and values"<sup>50</sup>. Whether he is right or whether the choice need be put in these stark terms I shall leave for another time, but his position does reinforce our sense of distance from Arendt.

This is in no way meant to imply that she now has little to say to a contemporary audience. My opening remarks implied Arendt's reputation is in the ascendant and this is not without good reason. Her interest in human creativity, action, freedom, contingency, fallibility, marginality and her disavowal of historical laws, mere behaviour and processuality remains timely. But even more than this, at the heart of her philosophy was an insistence that life was the only thing worthy of philosophical scrutiny. This life is the common human life where nothing comes to an end, where everything is chaotic and where each new individual and generation gets to start all over again.<sup>51</sup> This capacity for renewal that Arendt identified as natality implies the readiness to submit our cultural inheritance to critique. In this spirit it is only fitting that in the centenary of her birth we celebrate her theoretical fecundity by seeking her assistance to "think what we are doing".

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<sup>50</sup> Agamben, G. *The Open: Man And Animal* Stanford University Press, Stanford California, 2004. P16.

<sup>51</sup> Heller, A. *op. cit.*, p 24.