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**NEITHER HEROIC NOR EVEN HUMAN  
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## **Neither heroic nor even human: Hannah Arendt's Critique of Domestic Work**

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**Abstract.** *The text analyses Arendt's peculiar conception of "labor" as it appears in her famous essay The Human Condition. It searches for the roots of this concept in the ancient Greek word for necessity. It explains then how the different meanings of necessity translate into the notion of labor and domestic work. It offers also a brief apology of domestic work and a suggestion to interpret and value the role of the domestic world in the ancient world, accordingly with a famous passage in the Iliad that is, partially, quoted by Arendt.*

**Keywords:** labor, domestic work, Hannah Arendt, necessity, nature, freedom.

### **1. Introduction**

Hannah Arendt is one of the most original and relevant political thinkers of the last century. Her political universe orbits around the notions of freedom and politics. For Arendt the ultimate meaning of politics is freedom.

In the tradition of Montesquieu and Alexis de Tocqueville, she reflects largely on the circumstances, requirements and general conditions for the flourishing of freedom. She concedes that, at the deepest level, every human being is capable of achieving at least a minimum degree of freedom, in so far as every human being represents a new beginning through the radical novelty of birth.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, she considers that, without the adequate political conditions, freedom cannot be fully realized. Human freedom at its highest degree amounts to political freedom.

Arendt harbors no illusions concerning the possibilities for human freedom in the modern world. Two obvious dangers are in her view: the Soviet totalitarianism and the consumer's society of the West. At a deeper level though, lies the fundamental opposition between freedom and necessity. Arendt thought that freedom was achieved

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<sup>1</sup> See for example H. ARENDT, *The Human Condition*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1998, Chapter V, section 24; see also IDEM, *Denktagebuch*, Pieper, Munich 2002, 188.

for a brief period in the political sphere constituted within the polis, the peculiar Greek political institution; whereas necessity was only banished – but never fully conquered or vanished – to the domestic sphere of the household.

Arendt regards all domestic activities as servile activities with no inherent worth or meaning. The only noble purpose of domestic activities is to liberate the happy few that would be able to participate in politics without the burden of necessity. In classical Greece, it was only because of slaves and women shared the common burden of domestic activities that a few free men were in the position of becoming fully human through political action.

I first encountered Arendt's critique of domestic activities while working in my B.A. thesis several years ago. At the moment I found the critique eminently correct. Since then I had the opportunity of learning more about the classical Greek world as I wrote my Ph.D. dissertation on Aristotle. I also have been intensely involved in many domestic activities mainly as a husband and father of a family. Personal experience and reflection forced me to review my initial evaluation.

It is easy to caricature Arendt's position. To avoid this danger I must clarify first the Arendt's basic political vocabulary in *The Human Condition*.

## **2. Arendt's basic political vocabulary in *The Human Condition***

*The Human Condition* is a philosophical essay that was written originally in English and published in the US in 1956. Years later Arendt herself wrote a version of the same essay in German that was published in 1960 in Germany;<sup>2</sup> the texts are not identical, but there are to my knowledge no significant changes. Naturally, the expressive force in German is greater than in English, since it is her mother tongue.

The purpose of *The Human Condition* appears to be simple – to think on “what we are doing.” To answer this question Arendt develops a philosophical epic, a great narrative that encompasses the ancient Greek world, the Enlightenment and the complex postwar world taking into account the World War II, the *Shoa* and the rise of the Soviet Union.

Like the *Iliad*, the philosophical epic of *The Human Condition* has no happy ending. Arendt does not bother to formulate a “what-can-you-do-about-it” list or a call to arms. On the contrary, she closes her impressive *tour de force* with a synthesis of the anxieties from the Cold War Era: the very real possibility of humankind annihilation through an atomic war; and the meaningless alternative of the newborn consumer's society, what she called “the victory of the *animal laborans*.”<sup>3</sup>

Arendt impressive train of thought in *The Human Condition* is constructed in great part on a basis of conceptual oppositions. The most fundamental of these

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<sup>2</sup> Cfr. IDEM, *Vita Activa oder Vom tätigen Leben*, Pieper, Munich 1960.

<sup>3</sup> Cfr. IDEM, *The Human Condition*, Chapter V, Section 45: “The Victory of the *Animal laborans*”.

oppositions is the one between necessity and freedom. This opposition is reflected in the difference between nature and the (human) world.

Nature is the universe and within it the Earth. Nature precedes humankind and does not depend on humans to exist. Insofar as we are leaving beings, we are part of nature. The world, on the other hand, is constructed by humans. It constitutes our habitat, and it wouldn't exist without us. We build and sustain the world. The world exists within nature, but it's not restricted to it.

Nature is the realm of necessity. Cosmic necessity prevails in the universe. It rules the regular motion of the planets, the stars, other celestial bodies and the galaxies. Cosmic necessity affects the Earth. The rotation and translation movements of the planet respectively cause day and night and the seasons of the year. Necessity also rules life on Earth – the ecosystem of the Earth at large, as well as the life of each leaving being. In general terms, each living being is subjected to the cycle of birth, growth, reproduction, and death that constitutes the life of every leaving species. For Arendt, the Ecosystem has no other goal than the permanent iteration of the cycle of generation and corruption.<sup>4</sup>

All leaving creatures on Earth are subjected to necessity, but only the humankind is capable of freedom and only human beings experience the natural urges and needs as compulsory and as a limit to their freedom. What for the rest of leaving beings constitutes the way of being and the inexorable course of their life on Earth, for human beings is an imposition that goes against human freedom. Nature rules kindly over all other animals but tyrannically and despotically over the humankind.

This is a problematic notion of nature grounded on an uncommon understanding of necessity. An understanding deeply inspired by a particular reading of the classical Greek world, as we will see later.

Dominated by necessity, nature is closed to any novelty of any kind. We human beings are evidently natural beings, but we aspire to transcend the realm of necessity and arrive at the realm of freedom. I would say that this aspiration, is part of "our nature", but that would be anathema to Arendt.

Arendt denies the existence of a "human nature". A human nature would imply a biological or metaphysical determination. This nature would run directly against the fact of human freedom. She prefers consequently to talk about "human condition" as the way life is given to human beings on Earth.<sup>5</sup> We are *conditioned* but not *determined*.

Furthermore, Arendt distinguishes between two main kinds of "life" or of ways of leaving: the *vita contemplativa* and the *vita activa*.

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<sup>4</sup> Cfr. *ibidem*, 96-98.

<sup>5</sup> Cfr. *ibidem*, 10-11.

The *vita contemplativa* is the theoretical life. As we know θεωρεῖν means originally “to contemplate”. Thinking is the activity of the *vita contemplativa*, an activity that, in principle, requires no physical movement. Those dedicated to the *vita contemplativa* spend their life wondering about ontological and epistemological questions.<sup>6</sup>

The *vita activa* is composed of three main activities: labor, work, and action. Each arises from a peculiar way in which human life is conditioned. Each has its proper space and its proper “products” or “effects”, and each demand its proper abilities.

The spaces are defined by the grade of “publicity” that each of these activities deserves. That is, by their adequacy to be performed in front of a public: persons unrelated to one another by family ties. The more public space should be the political sphere – the space where politics are made; by the same token, the most private space should be the domestic sphere, i.e. the family.

The kind of products is defined according to their durability and their impact in transforming or preserving the human world. The products of labor are essentially perishable goods, whereas the products of work are made to last, they are objects of use. The products of action are not durable in the material tangible sense of the physical world of objects; their durability refers much more to their impact in defining the organization of the human world.

The abilities required to perform each of these activities go from activities shared by almost any other mammal and superior animals to technical and political abilities.

Labor arises out of our animal condition and it encompasses all the activities performed for the sustainment of the life of the individual and the species, such as reproduction, feeding, nurturing, resting or personal hygiene.<sup>7</sup> The products of labor are the perishable goods necessary to sustain life; tangible things like food that we literally consume in order to nourish ourselves.<sup>8</sup> The activities of labor belong to the private realm. They should take place outside the public eye. The abilities demanded by labor are those that we shared with other animal species. They are not specifically human. Labor activities are extenuating because of the toll they impose on the body of the laborer, but otherwise, they are undemanding. As a laborer, a human being is an *animal laborans*.<sup>9</sup>

The activities of labor pursue no other end beyond the sustainment of life. They are trapped in the cycle of generation and consumption that characterizes life on Earth. They are hard and unavoidable but meaningless.

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<sup>6</sup> Cfr. *ibidem*, 12-15.

<sup>7</sup> Cfr. *ibidem*, 7.

<sup>8</sup> Cfr. *ibidem*, 96.

<sup>9</sup> Cfr. *ibidem*, 84-85.

As the condition of labor is our animal condition, so is what Arendt calls “worldliness” the condition out of which the category of work arises. By “worldliness” Arendt means our ability to transform nature, to make artificial things out of natural materials. We build a physical world inside nature; a habitat of cities, towns, roads, canals, ports, dams and the like. We do so in order to live a comfortable and secure life. Activities related to technics, technology, crafts, engineering and even arts belong to this category. The space of work is the physical human world.

The products of work are the innumerable variety of artifacts, manufactured goods, and structures built by human beings, from a pan to a gun, an airport or a masterpiece of art. The activities of work take place between the private and the public, like the workshop of a blacksmith or a carpenter; they are neither private as a house, nor as open as the marketplace, but they are open to the public. The abilities belonging to work are those of the crafts and the arts. In contrast with labor, work is proper to humans, since it requires intelligence to a higher degree than labor does.<sup>10</sup> As a worker, the human being is a *homo faber*.<sup>11</sup> Finally, plurality is the human condition out of which action arises. Plurality is the fact that, on the one hand, each human being is unique; and in the other hand each human being has something in common, shares something, with the rest of the humanity. The simultaneous presence of something shared with all, and something unique to us constitutes the condition of plurality.<sup>12</sup>

The activities belonging to action are the highest and noblest human activities within the *vita activa*. Letting thinking aside, only in action are humans able to realize their freedom fully. The activities of action take place in the public realm, that space within the physical world that is better symbolized by the public square: a place open to anybody, that belongs to everybody collectively but to nobody exclusively.

Action requires more than the technical intelligence proper to work; it requires political abilities. Abilities to persuade or convince others to join common initiatives concerning the organization of the common life. Abilities to negotiate and make agreements with others. Abilities like practical wisdom and political imagination.

Actions transcend the bounds of natural necessity in two different ways: First, they are activities performed not for the sake of survival. They are free from the compulsion of bodily needs; they are also free in its motivations since they do not aspire to anything material like money or gold. Because of this double transcendence, the activities of action are unpredictable both in their genesis as in their consequences; they are always unexpected, surprising and new; they transform the world and, at the same time, they reveal in the most radical way the singularity or uniqueness of the

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<sup>10</sup> Cfr. *ibidem*, 10.

<sup>11</sup> Cfr. *ibidem*, Chapter III, Section 11: “The Labour of our Body and the Work of our Hands”.

<sup>12</sup> Cfr. *ibidem*, 15.

agent. Actions are the essence of politics since they are the best crystallization of human freedom.

Although for Arendt the activities falling into the category of action are the essential human activities for the realization of freedom, it is not always easy to grasp what exactly she means by action. Assuming that actions have as space the public realm, we could say that actions are all that decisions and non-violent political initiatives that impact and transform the public realm and the way we live together.

Examples of actions would be the speech of Winston Churchill on 13 May 1940 at the House of Commons, remembered for the allusion to “blood, toil, tears and sweat”; the regular speeches of Charles de Gaulle from the exile in London to the French; Konrad Adenauer’s negotiation with the Soviet Union in 1955 to achieve the liberation of ten thousand German prisoners; or the kneeling in December 1970 in Warsaw of Willy Brandt before the monument to the heroes of the Warsaw ghetto. An action would also be the famous Martin Luther King’s speech *I have a dream*; or the kissing of the Polish soil from John Paul II during his first state visit to Poland; or the singing of *Amazing Grace* in June 2015 by President Obama during the funeral of Clement Pickney, one of the black Americans murdered by a white supremacist at a church in Charleston.

All these great gestures are unique, convey profound symbolic meaning and have a major political impact. They are free initiatives that revealed the singularity of those who performed them and, at the same time, they indeed changed the world.

If genuine human freedom is only achievable through such actions, and if only through these actions are we able to know ourselves and, by the same token, reveal our true self to the others; it follows that human plenitude is out of reach for the vast majority of us. Compared with the magnificence of actions the activities of labor would lack any political or even personal relevance; whereas the activities of work would be only tolerated as means to build the physical world that functions as space for actions.

### **3. What is wrong with Labor?**

According to Arendt, labor fulfills two major tasks.<sup>13</sup> The first is the urgent task of satisfying or attending biological and physical needs, such as hunger, thirst and physical exhaustion. In order to do this, laboring activities of production integrate to an endless cycle of generation and consumption.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Notice how Arendt uses the substantive ‘labor’ in a very particular and uncommon way: as equivalent to the German substantive ‘Arbeit’; and she uses ‘work’ as equivalent to the German ‘Herstellen’. But the common equivalent of ‘Arbeit’ is obviously ‘work’; and the equivalent of ‘Herstellen’ is ‘fabrication’ and not ‘work’. Nevertheless and for the sake of clarity, I will use ‘labor’ and ‘Arbeit’ as she does.

<sup>14</sup> “Whatever labor produces is meant to be fed into the human life process almost immediately, and this consumption, regenerating the life process, produces – or rather, reproduces – new ‘labor power’, needed for the further sustenance of the body” (ARENDR, *The Human Condition*, 99-100).

The second task of labor is to preserve the physical human world so that nature does not “devour” again what human beings have built. This is the task that we would assign to domestic labor.<sup>15</sup>

Without maintenance nature will recover and literally cover whole cities and even pyramids; as it happens with many Mayan ancient cities and as it is the case of the pyramid of Tlachihualtepetl in Mexico: a massive pyramid in the State of Puebla that to this day remains covered by earth and vegetation and looks like a mountain.

In performing both tasks – feeding or nurturing and maintenance – the activities of labor are inherently against human freedom and human realization for many reasons:

- They offer no possibility to develop the singularity and uniqueness of a person; they are activities common to all developed animal species.

- They are unfree activities since those who perform them are bound by the necessity of their bodies and by the life cycle of nature.

- They leave nothing memorable behind. The products of labor are consumed to feed the leaving beings or wither away spontaneously. These products lack the duration to be part of the stable human world. And on the side of the maintenance labors, if they stop for a while, nature will reclaim what it's hers rapidly.

- The activities of labor are unfit to appear in the public realm and to be discussed as political matters. To put it metaphorically, when hunger and physical need, in general, enter the public realm, they destroy any possibility of a political discussion beyond the urgency of calming those craves.

The domestic labors of maintenance do not share the almost painful sensation of urgency, that affects the tasks of feeding for survival, but they are equally trapped into an endless and meaningless iterative cycle. They certainly require great strength and perseverance, nevertheless there is nothing heroic about them:

“In the old tales and mythological stories, it has often assumed the grandeur of heroic fights against overwhelming odds, as in the account of Hercules, whose cleaning of the Augean stables is among the twelve heroic ‘labors’. A similar connotation of heroic fighting spirit is manifest in the medieval use of the word: labor, *travail*, *arebeit* [sic]. However, the daily fight in which the human body is engaged to keep the world clean and prevent its decay bears little resemblance to heroic deeds; the endurance it needs to repair every day anew the waste of yesterday is not courage, and what makes

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<sup>15</sup> “Equally bond up with the recurring cycles of natural movements, but not quite so urgently imposed upon man by ‘the condition of human life’ itself [a quote from Locke], is the second task of laboring – its constant, unending fight against the processes of growth and decay through which nature forever invades the human artifice, threatening the durability of the world and its fitness for human use” (*ibidem*, 100).

the effort painful [“mühevoll” in the German version, i.e. “extenuating”] is not danger but its relentless repetition.”<sup>16</sup>

There is nothing “heroic” whatsoever in fulfilling the domestic labors of maintenance. Monotony, repetition, frustration, and dullness characterize the domestic labors.

In the classical antiquity labor tasks were imposed upon slaves – men and women – and free women – wives, mothers, and daughters – in order to release a few free men and allow them to really exercise their political freedom and bring about great political deeds.<sup>17</sup>

Where do these notions of necessity and labor come from?

#### **4. Appeasing necessity: Domestic labor as ancient and modern slavery**

Arendt’s peculiar notion of necessity remits to the Greek notion of ἀνάγκη. The word appears in the last section of the chapter dedicated to the activity of labor in *The Human Condition*. It is mentioned only in a footnote referring to a famous phrase in the *Iliad* that Simone Weil chose as a motto for her book *La condition ouvrière* published in 1951.<sup>18</sup> However, a glimpse in the *Denktagebuch*, Arendt’s intellectual diary, contains almost forty entries of the word ἀνάγκη and its derivatives. The first mention occurs in May 1951 and the last in September 1969.

Three meanings of ἀνάγκη have special relevance for Arendt’s conception of necessity and labor:

First, ἀνάγκη as a cosmic necessity with its consequential physical, biological necessity and compulsion. This is the necessity that rules across the cosmos and on Earth.

Second, ἀνάγκη as a violent force. As something imposed violently by an external force, like destiny imposed by the gods upon us, or even slavery.

The third meaning is closed to the second: ἀνάγκη understood as the means of enforcement and coercion.<sup>19</sup>

A brief review of three entries in Arendt’s intellectual diary brings to light the relation between necessity (ἀνάγκη), labor and slavery.

An entry dated February 1952 affirms: “That only the slave was a laborer [Arbeiter], and every laborer [Arbeiter] was a slave”.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> *Ibidem*, 101. For the German version see IDEM, *Vita activa oder Vom tätigen Leben*, Pieper, Munich 1981, 92.

<sup>17</sup> Cfr. IDEM, *The Human Condition*, 82-83.

<sup>18</sup> Cfr. *ibidem*, 131, Nt. 83.

<sup>19</sup> For the meaning of ἀνάγκη see Wilhelm PAPE, *Handwörterbuch der griechischen Sprache. Griechisch-Deutsches Handwörterbuch*, Vol. 1, 183. Edited by Max Sengebuch, 3rd Edition, Vieweg & Sohn, Braunschweig, 1914.

Further, she affirms that: "He, who labors in order to obtain the ἀναγκαῖα for his personal consumption is not free. He, who labors in order to provide the ἀναγκαῖα for others, is a slave."<sup>21</sup>

The ἀναγκαῖα are the goods and services indispensable for survival. The slave activities are all related to the production of nourishment, and all other activities belonging to care and maintenance indispensable for the life of a household. This implies that free women in ancient Greece, who were in charge of the maintenance of the household, were in essence, no different from slaves. Then freedom is only possible when the person spends no effort or time in obtaining the ἀναγκαῖα, the necessary things for life. As Arendt herself affirms in the same entry: "Freedom as emancipation from the ἀναγκαῖα is also only thanks to slavery possible."<sup>22</sup>

A later text dated as the third entry of April 1952 describes the situation of those dedicated to labor: "In [the activities of] labor, dominated by the ἀναγκαῖα, the human being is always isolated and haunted by worries and anxiety".<sup>23</sup>

And a little further in the same entry she adds that: "As laborers, dominated by the ἀναγκαῖα, the human beings are almost like animals."<sup>24</sup>

People dedicated to labor activities are de facto slaves. Even if *de iure* they count as free men and women.

Yet, the most telling entry for the understanding of necessity and labor appears a little earlier in the intellectual diary. In it, we found a reference to the same sentence of the *Iliad* quoted in *The Human Condition* and to the book of Simone Weil. It is the first entry dated in April 1952. It is a long entry, so I will quote only the most important phrases.

Arendt opens with a radical assertion: "The Ἀνάγκη [Necessity] is the Goddess of the ἀναγκαῖα [necessary things to sustain life] and as such she is to be feared."<sup>25</sup>

It follows a quotation with no translation from the sixth Book of the *Iliad*, a famous sentence from Hector to her wife Andromache: "πόλλ' ἀεκαζομένη, κρατερὴ δ' ἐπικείσεται ἀνάγκη." The sentence could be rendered as: "It may be extremely against your will, nevertheless strongly will necessity weigh on you."

For Arendt, this short sentence encapsulates the truth about ἀνάγκη: Necessity rules over humankind. It rules in a violent, powerful way and against our will. Simone

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<sup>20</sup> "Nur der Sklave war ein Arbeiter, und jeder Arbeiter war ein Sklave" (ARENDR, *Denktagebuch*, Heft VIII, Entry 6, 183).

<sup>21</sup> "Wer arbeitet, um für sich selbst ἀναγκαῖα zu beschaffen, ist nicht frei. Wer arbeitet, um für Andere ἀναγκαῖα zu beschaffen, ist ein Sklave" (*ibidem*).

<sup>22</sup> "Freiheit ist also als Emanzipation von den ἀναγκαῖα nur möglich durch Sklaverei" (*ibidem*).

<sup>23</sup> "In der Arbeit, den ἀναγκαῖα unterworfen, ist der Mensch immer isoliert und von Sorge und Angst getrieben" (*ibidem*, Heft IX, Entry 3, 204). Underlined in the original.

<sup>24</sup> "Als Arbeitende, den ἀναγκαῖα versklavt, sind Menschen fast wie Tiere" (*ibidem*, 203-4). Underlined in the original.

<sup>25</sup> "Die Ἀνάγκη ist die Göttin der ἀναγκαῖα und als solche furchtbar" (*ibidem*, Heft IX, Entry 1, 201).

Weil somehow envisages this reality but did not go far enough to draw the obvious conclusion: "Freedom and Justice seem to be impossible to reconcile. Because freedom is only possible, when the inherent compulsion of the ἀναγκαῖα is imposed upon others."<sup>26</sup>

Only through slavery is political freedom possible. The origin of slavery is not in politics to be found, but in nature itself and the way nature makes itself feel upon the animal condition of human beings: "The enslavement of the human being by the human beings is conditioned by the original enslavement of the human being through the ἀναγκαῖα."<sup>27</sup>

We may have proscribed slavery, but we have not at all redeemed the natural slavish character of labor, and of all those domestic activities dedicated to the sustainment of life in a household – all the ἀναγκαῖα.

Because we do not accept the elementary violent force of necessity, we pretend that there could be some dignity in labor: "Moreover: Through the recognition of 'the dignity of labor [Arbeit]' we pretend that the Ἀνάγκη is harmless, and so is with everything, that we cannot rule – death, suffering etc., the old story."<sup>28</sup>

To summarize: The ancients had slaves and housewives to deal with the power of necessity; we moderns have low wage workers (Arendt would say 'laborers', but it amounts to the same reality) and housewives. Both groups may seem legally free, but they remained fully under the imperium of necessity. They are the modern slaves, and we are so deluged that we hardly accept or comment this modern form of 'soft' slavery.

## 5. A brief apology of domestic labor

Before I present some arguments that in my opinion go against Arendt negative evaluation of domestic labor, I want to underline the plausibility of her claim.

It is plausible to assume that the life of the slaves in the cotton plantations of the south of the US may not have offered opportunities to reveal one's unique self through political deeds and speeches. We could say the same about the prisoners of the Nazi labor camps that work among others for Volkswagen. Similar forms of slavery, soft and hard, were common during the industrial revolution in the United Kingdom, and are still common in countries like China or Mexico.

It remains a historical fact, though, that among precisely the black slaves in the south of the US the seeds of the most creative musical form were planted. The musical form most open to improvisation, innovation and experimentation, the musical style of

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<sup>26</sup> "Freiheit und Gerechtigkeit scheinen unvereinbar zu sein, weil Freiheit nur möglich ist, wenn das eigentlich Zwingende der ἀναγκαῖα auf Andere abgeschoben ist" (*ibidem*).

<sup>27</sup> "Die Versklavung des Menschen unter den Menschen ist bedingt durch die ursprüngliche Versklavung des Menschen durch die ἀναγκαῖα" (*ibidem*).

<sup>28</sup> "Ferner: Durch die Anerkennung der »Würde der Arbeit« verharmlost man die Ἀνάγκη und damit alles, wessen man nicht Herr werden kann – Tod, Leiden etc., die alte Geschichte" (*ibidem*).

jazz, germinated under political and from the point of view of Arendt natural slavery. Jazz is the music of the *animal laborans*.

This historical experience alone should warn us about the condemnation of labor as inherently slavish. Therefore I will offer some arguments to defend the essentially human character of domestic labor. The first argument concerns labor in general; the rest focus on domestic labor.

My first argument concerns the notion of animality. Human animality is not an imposition; is part of our way of being. For Arendt, the animal body seems to be only a vehicle. As if the human being were this noble and pure spirit 'mounted' as it were on an alien body; a pestilent, overweight and decadent body; a body that suffers hunger and thirst, needs to rest and have sexual urgencies. To the contrary, our body is the first bond with others. The 'animal' bond that binds us with our parents and siblings is the precondition to any later political bond.<sup>29</sup> It is true that we could degrade this bond and reduce it to a mere biological connection with no human relation at all. That is precisely the case by sperm donors and the like: they become parents only in the most biological and not even animal sense since they avoid sexual intercourse.

But we are also able to sublime those natural bonds by attending the biological necessities of our children, siblings, and parents in a humane way. To explain this with an image: a poultry industrial farm is not like a family home; even if in both places new members of the species are borne and feed.

When we care for the animal necessities of those in our charge, there is no 'animalization' of our humanity, but a humanization, a sublimation of our animal dimension. And contrary to what Arendt believes, this kind of labor, do demand more than simply bodily force. It requires from us virtues as kindness, patience, and fortitude.

A further argument points to the unity in the family household of the two tasks of labor. As we saw, Arendt differentiates two tasks of labor: one of producing perishable goods, as in agriculture; and one for the maintenance of the household, as in housekeeping. The first task is for the sake of the maintenance of the life of the species; the second is for the sake of the maintenance of the habitat of the species. In fact, both tasks are part of domestic labor, then the goal of domestic labor is not only to keep the house clean, tidy and ready to be used; but much more to care for the life of the family members. In an adaptation of an Aristotelian insight we could say that the purpose of parenting and of the family household is not to assure the mere survival of the children; but to educate them so that they can become later in life good citizens, good workers and maybe good parents.

From this perspective, it is also false that the life of a family household is iterative, routine and cyclical to the extreme. As every parent knows, precisely the

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<sup>29</sup> Curiously, 'blood ties' is yet another meaning of *ἀνάγκη*.

contrary is the case. On the one hand, because each day is unique and each day brings its different challenges: sometimes the kids are sick, other times they are just angry and sad; sometimes the parents have enough money to pay the bills, often times they do not.

On the other hand, the family life has its stages. Time is always running and kids are growing up by the hour. They will eventually become adults and abandon the family household. Luckily, this does not imply that they abandon the family altogether. The life of a family is evidently linear, no cyclical. It resembles the family epics of the Ancient Testament; not the cyclical movements of the planets.

My third argument stresses the relevance of preservation and maintenance of the world. Arendt seems to mock the futility of the maintenance aspect of domestic labor because of "the endurance it needs to repair every day anew the waste of yesterday".<sup>30</sup>

She seems to forget that this attitude of maintenance and preservation is the radical opposite of the consumers' mentality that she so strongly, and rightly condemns. The tasks of washing the dishes, polishing the shoes, darning and patching the clothes of the oldest child so that the younger could also use them; all these menial and common practices resist at once the corrupting force of nature and the consumptive force of a society of consumers and its marketing gurus.

The attitude of preserve and repair is one of the attitudes that children usually learn at home. At the same time, it is an attitude with profoundly political implications running from the preservation of collective goods to the wise use of natural resources.

This brings us to my fourth argument: Arendt oversaw the symbiotic and creative relationship of codependency between the family household and the city, between the οἶκος and the πόλις. A variety of political virtues are first experienced and learned in the family household. Let me point out a few.

As I just mention, it is within the family household, and mostly through labor activities, that the children learn the importance of caring for the collective goods. The goods that belong to all of us collectively and to none of us exclusively. These are not only material goods, as a table in a household or a bank in a park would exemplify; they are also notional common goods as money and the laws. It is easy to see how a child could learn to be attentive to the family budget, and later on to be attentive to her or his enterprise budget, and to the budget of his or her municipality. And the same could be said about the laws.

It is also in the family household that the children learn that when facing a menacing problem, the urgent thing is to solve the problem, and not to find who's to blame. Much of the political stalemate we suffer in numerous modern democracies have

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<sup>30</sup> ARENDT, *The Human Condition*, 101.

to do with politicians' fundamental preoccupation of assigning blame to others, instead of themselves taking care of the problem.

The family household could also teach the children to be practical, to prefer the possible over the optimal. A good family learns to love the imperfection. Imperfection manifested in each one of the member's characters and present in the everyday life as well as in the extraordinary celebrations. Only by accepting imperfection could a family member be happy inside the family. By the same token only by dealing and accepting imperfection – imperfect deals, laws, alliances, policies, etc. – could a person be an effective politician. This brings me to my final arguments.

## **6. Hector's words to Andromache**

Paradoxically it is along with the sense for the possible and the love of imperfection that comes the noblest of the ideals: The conviction that certain realities, imperfect as they may be, are worth to defend and preserve. That someone could be even ready to risk and loss her life for the sake of something other than her survival. This is the fundamental heroic conviction. And here we come back to that intriguing phrase from Hector in the *Iliad* that has caused us so much trouble: "πόλλ' ἀεκαζομένη, κρατερὴ δ' ἐπικείσεται ἀνάγκη" ("It may be extremely against your will, nevertheless strongly will necessity weigh on you").

As we saw, apparently following Simone Weil, Arendt interpreted the sentence as an affirmation of the condemnation of humankind, and especially of women to dedicate themselves to labor activities. Since the phrase was directed to Andromache, Hector's wife. It's easy to see that the burden of labor by nature and convention weighs disproportionately on women – they bear the children and oftentimes they are in charge of the household.

In the world of classical Greece and according to Arendt they were also excluded from the public realm. Condemned to dwell in the family household, they were also deprived of the opportunities to earn fame and glory through heroic deeds. The words of Hector seem only to confirm this negative view. If we put the words into their proper context, though, a radically different view emerges.

The scene takes place during the sixth Chant in the verses that go from 369 to 502. By that moment the war is finally drawing to an end. It is clear that Hector is no match for Achill, no one is. After talking with Helen, Hector hurries to his palace to meet Andromache. He doesn't find her in their chamber; she is with their son at the tower, crying and lamenting, but also trying to locate the weakest parts of the protecting wall surrounding Troy.

When they finally came together Andromache reminds Hector of her situation. Of how her father and her seven brothers were killed by Achill; how her mother was taken as a part of the spoil, and after paying hefty ransom the mother was released

only to pass away soon afterward. Andromache reminds Hector that he now is for her “the father, the mother, and the brother”. She asks him to remain safe and away from the battle at the tower, and not to make their baby an orphan and her a widow. Surprisingly, she finished her fervent request with a practical petition: to move some warriors to the weakest part of the wall, in order to repeal the assault of the Achaean enemies.

The initial answer of Hector to her request goes as one would expect from a hero: He said that it would be shameful for him to retire from battle; he has to comply with the demands of someone from his blood and strive after glory for his father and for him. So far the answer goes according to Arendt’s view of the hero. The following words, however, imply a whole different order of priorities: “Yet not so much doth the grief of the Trojans that shall be in the after time moves me, neither Hecabe’s own, nor king Priam’s, nor my brethren’s, many and brave, who then shall fall in the dust beneath the hands of their foemen, as doth thy grief, when some brazen-coated Achaean [455] shall lead thee away weeping and rob thee of thy day of freedom (ἐλεύθερον ἡμαρ). Then haply in Argos shalt thou ply the loom (ἱστὸν) at another’s bidding, or bear water from Messeis or Hypereia, it may be much against thy will, nevertheless strongly will necessity weigh upon thee.”<sup>31</sup>

Hector then tries to hold his baby, but the baby is afraid of his father’s helm. So Hector puts away his helm, holds the baby and make a prayer to Zeus and all the gods. Hector asks for his son to be greater than Hector is and to rejoice the heart of the baby’s mother Andromache.

Finally, Hector ordered Andromache in a kindly way to go back the house (εἰς οἶκον ἰοῦσα) and to occupy herself with “her own tasks” (τὰ σ’ αὐτῆς ἔργα κόμιζε), like weaving clothes (ἱστὸν):<sup>32</sup> “Nay, go thou to the house and busy thyself with thine own tasks, the loom and the distaff, and bid thy handmaids ply their work: but war shall be for men, for all, but most of all for me, of them that dwell in Ilios.”<sup>33</sup>

The meaning of Hector’s words is now clear. He knows and has made peace with the fact that Troy is doomed; he is not afraid to die, and he doesn’t fear either that

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<sup>31</sup> ἀλλ’ οὐ μοι Τρώων τόσσον μέλει ἄλγος ὀπίσσω,  
οὔτ’ αὐτῆς Ἑκάβης οὔτε Πριάμοιο ἄνακτος  
οὔτε κασιγνήτων, οἳ κεν πολέες τε καὶ ἐσθλοὶ  
ἐν κόνιῃσι πέσοιεν ὑπ’ ἀνδράσι δυσμενέεσσιν,  
ὅσσον σεῦ, ὅτε κέν τις Ἀχαιῶν χαλκοχιτώνων  
δακρυόεσσαν ἄγηται ἐλεύθερον ἡμαρ ἀπούρας:  
καὶ κεν ἐν Ἄργει εἰοῦσα πρὸς ἄλλης ἱστὸν ὑφαίνοις,  
καὶ κεν ὕδωρ φορέοις Μεσσηϊδος ἢ Ὑπερείης  
πόλλ’ ἀεκαζομένη, κρατερὴ δ’ ἐπικείσεται ἀνάγκη (HOMER, *The Iliad*, VI, 450-458; English translation by A.T. MURRAY, Harvard University Press, Cambridge (MA) - William Heinemann, Ltd., London 1924).

<sup>32</sup> Cf. *ibidem*, VI, 490-491.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibidem*, VI, 490-493.

his fellow warriors or even his father get killed by the enemy. What he really fears is that his wife becomes a slave and so, that the strong necessity (κρατερὴ ἀνάγκη) may be imposed upon her. That strong necessity would consist for Andromache in being forced to perform labor activities, like weaving clothes (ἰστὸν) or bringing water, for some noble lady in Argos and for some alien family household.

Ultimately the greatest Trojan hero is not fighting for immortal glory and remembrance; nor is he fighting to protect his fellow citizens or to save his homeland. What he cares for deepest in his heart is for the freedom (ἐλευθερία) of his wife. Hector reminds his wife, that he is her only protection from slavery (δούλιον), and that he prefers to die, rather than see her being taken away into captivity. He looks forward not to his great future as the victorious killer of Achill, but to the great future of his baby boy. And he concludes by ordering Andromache back to their house, to perform exactly the same labor, weaving clothes i.e. "ἰστὸν" that the strong necessity could impose upon her.

In this powerful scene it becomes clear that, at least from the point of view of Hector, heroic deeds are for the sake of the preservation of the family household. And that neither he nor Andromache believes that the domestic activities are in themselves a form of slavery. The slavery begins, when a woman is forced to serve unwillingly an alien family in the most intimate tasks.

Most of us will never be in a situation to emulate even distantly the heroic deeds of Hector. But for many of us, the chance to appreciate and protect our family household is still open.

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