Classical Influences on Hannah Arendt's Philosophy of Power and Violence

Introduction

When Aristotle said, "Man is a political animal" (πολιτικὸν ὁ ἄνθρωπος ζῷον), the idea of the animal reflected a perspective on the volatility of human behavior and possibly even the wild and irrational parts of humanity, namely power and the violent measures taken to gain it. Many thinkers have contributed to the exploration of these large and looming topics. One in particular is Hannah Arendt, a Jewish philosopher and political theorist from the 20th century. Arendt's ideas about violence and power are most fully detailed in her *On Violence*, which argues that violence is the opposite of power. The notion of human nature, as it is conceptually understood in the modern world, first appeared in Plato's works and its enduring presence has found its way in the writings of Arendt.[1] Both Aristotle and Plato are influential in Arendt's writings and the theories they lay out bear similar lines of thinking. This paper will argue that Arendt's understanding of power and violence echoes Plato's and Aristotle's earlier ideas about human nature and natural power imbalances in the *Republic* and *Politics*.

Arendt and Labor

Hannah Arendt was born in Germany in 1906 and grew up in a Jewish family of Russian and Lithuanian descent. During the outbreak of World War I, Arendt's family had moved to Berlin, and when the Second World War began, they fled to New York City in 1941. Arendt had grown up learning Latin and ancient Greek and this interest in classical antiquity often emerges in her writings. The two works that are in discussion during this section are "Human Condition"

[1] "Human Nature," Stanford Encyclopedia of Philsophy, published March 15, 2021, https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/human-nature/

(1958) and "On Violence" (1970). This section will focus on her treatment of the biological processes of humans and how these relate to power and violence. This will focus primarily on Arendt's ideas that are put forth in her Human Condition as it outlines the basic idea of Labor through Arendt's eyes. It is important to begin by discussing the first component of her three-fold theory of the Vita Activa which sets out to explain the fundamental experience of being human. Readers will understand how power is embedded from the beginning of mankind. Readers will be able to contextualize her ideas in the following section when Aristotle's theory of natural slavery is discussed in comparison with Arendt's theory of Labor.

In her *Human Condition*, Arendt's treatment of human being-in-the-world called the *Vita Activa* is divided into three fundamental parts: labor, work, and action. Labor refers to the biological and natural processes that humans are subjected to. It is the ability to sustain life, it never "produces anything but life."[2] The unconditional necessities needed to maintain life like food, sleep, shelter, and more, fall under this category. In this analysis of labor, Arendt looks to the writings of Aristotle's *Politics* to draw a distinction between "labor" and "work." Recognizing that it is a strange distinction to draw, she uses past thinkers like Aristotle to disprove its complete novelty. Arendt looks to "[John] Locke's distinction between working hands and a laboring body" and sees this as "reminiscent of the ancient Greek distinction between the *cherirotechnes*, the craftsman,… and those who, like 'slaves and tame animals with their bodies minister to the necessities of life.'"[3] Here, Arendt quotes a passage from Aristotle's *Politics*, iterating the relevance of Arisotle's theory about natural slavery in her introduction to labor. Arendt is eager to subscribe to the division of labor and work in ancient thought, as she

[2] Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (University of Chicago Press, 1958), 88.
[3] Ibid., 79.

quotes Aristotle's *Politics* in the preceding passage. This harkening back to Ancient Greece is what Arendt grounds her following arguments about labor in the *Vita Activa*.

Labor, in Arendt's *Vita Activa,* stresses a perception of hardship and struggle. It also stressed a hierarchy within the body. Locke's "working hands" and "laboring body" are both parts of one system, yet the work they do is different by nature and different by rank in the *Vita Activa*. Arendt writes "To labor meant to be enslaved by necessity, and this enslavement was inherent in the conditions of human life. Because men were dominated by the necessities of life, they could win their freedom only through the domination of those whom they subjected to necessity by force."[4] Men, by nature, are slaves to their own biology and possibly to other people. It is this natural slavery that is part of man's condition that is contested so much so that institutional slavery has emerged. Slavery allowed the powerful to remove themselves from the labors of their biology and assign these tasks to the weaker by force. One did not have to cook or clean for themselves and could shed, at least in their minds, the last remains of the traits they shared with any other beast (*animal laborans*), leaving only the parts that were considered truly "human." *Animal laborans* is Latin for "the laboring animal," and the present active participle "laborans" describes the animal—the human. The condition of enslavement is never a single occurrence, but an ongoing state of being that is inappropriate to man but is appropriate for animals, hence the terminology of animal and not "homo laborans." In this terminology that is central to Arendt's work, there is an anxiety to separate the part of humankind that labors and the parts that create or rationalize. If Arendt and Aristotle agree that laboring is inherently part of human beings, then enslavement and the forceful removal of labor is a violent reaction to man's biological inconveniences.

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[4] Ibid., 83-4.

Standing in direct opposition to the *animal laborans* is the *homo faber* (man, the maker). Arendt's concept of *homo faber* is grounded in the sort of person who manages to remove themselves significantly from the realm of nature. Directly correlated with the second part of the *Vita Activa*—work—*homo faber* is someone whose principal characteristic is that of a builder. However, rather than building tools or other substances to satisfy a biological need, the *homo faber* builds tools that provide no inherent purpose to nature. The tools created are completely unbound by nature and may be physical or non-physical, creating such things that provide the stability and foundation of a world that is not primarily driven by sustaining life processes, things like art, poetry, and (perhaps, most importantly) the preconditions for a political community like legislation and voting.

Animal Laborans and the Vulgar Craftsman

Aristotle (384-322 BC) was the student of Plato and wrote many treatises on a variety of subjects, "Politics" being the focus of this section. The following will draw upon the established ideas of both Aristotle and Hannah Arendt. Examining in further detail at which point their ideas overlap, this section is focused on Arendt's idea of Animal Laborans and Aristotle's Vulgar Craftsman. Both ideas are grounded in a mutual understanding of humanity's biological necessities and how this condition of life is in tension with another.

Aristotle's ideas about natural slavery and other power dynamics found in human relationships can be found in his *Politics*. Like Aristotle, Arendt recognizes that ignoring the parts of the human condition that labor and enslave mankind is incorrect. Before Arendt's ideas about *Homo Faber* and *Animal Laborans*, Aristotle had already written about natural slavery and its basic components. The ancient philosopher is interested in exploring what sort of knowledge

one should have to exercise political power well. He begins by examining smaller associations like that of a household, where he dissects the relationship of a wife to a husband, a master to a slave, a master to his property, and so on. He does so by distinguishing the different types of rules that are present in the household. These are relationships for "those who cannot exist without each other necessarily."[5] The relationship between slave and master is characterized by the rationale of the master, and the labor of the slave comes together for the self-preservation of both individuals. Aristotle ascribes differing amounts of virtue to each individual, the master, the slave, and the vulgar craftsman. The vulgar craftsman is a type of slave that is incapable of being a good citizen because their life of manual labor prevents them from the tasks that build the virtue of a good citizen like voting or studying philosophy.[6]

The master can deliberate (βουλεύειν) and use practical wisdom (φρόνησις), but slaves are not fully capable of reason. The natural slave is "he who shares in reason to the extent of understanding it, but does not have it himself."[7] It is beneficial for the master because his slaves are "living tools" that furnish him and his household with necessary things like food, housekeeping, and general maintenance through the labor of their bodies. It is likewise beneficial for the slaves because they are led by their virtuous masters, since slaves are not able to rule themselves. While both natural slaves and vulgar craftsmen perform necessary tasks, the slave does so for their master, and the craftsman does so for their community. In this world of animals and men, (or rather, just animals), Arendt and Aristotle both recognize that the *labor* of the human condition requires the use of tools, whether that be humans, animals, or objects, to reduce the strain of the necessities of life.

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[5] Aristotle, *Politics*, trans. C.D.C. Reeve (Hackett Publishing, 1998), 1252a26.
[6] Ibid., 1277a36–1277b.
[7] Ibid., 1254b22-3.

Plato and Logical Violence

Plato (429-347/8 BC) grew up educated by the man who is considered the first philosopher in the West, Socrates. When his teacher died by execution in 399 BC, Plato began to write on philosophy. Socrates would be featured in many of his later dialogues, and his most notable work, the Republic, where he uses Socrates as a mouthpiece to provide a careful consideration of justice, what it is, and how to get it. The rest of this paper will compare the ideas of Plato and Arendt. The following section begins with a general introduction and overview of Plato's Republic and his theories of the Tripartite soul and the Forms. Then, the section will use an example of eugenics from Book 5 to illustrate the differences and similarities between Plato and Arendt on violence and the role of reason in it.

In book two of the *Republic*, Socrates is urged to provide his definition of justice and a picture of a just city which sets up the rest of the work. Socrates changes the discussion of an internal justice, or justice within one's soul, toward an external justice, namely justice in the political context. Socrates outlines a theoretical city called the *Kallipolis*. In building the first city, Socrates uses a division of labor between the wisdom-loving, the honor-loving, and the appetite-loving. Socrates divides these labors on account of a natural difference in people's souls. Socrates says "Each of us differs somewhat in nature from the others, one being suited to one job, another to another."[8] That person's nature is divided into three categories: the appetitive, the spirited, and the rational. The class ruled by their appetites are people like craftsmen, laborers, and merchants. The class ruled by their spirit are the guardians, or the class of soldiers, who protect the city and fight for justice. The ruling class is made up of the philosopher-kings, whose natures love wisdom. Socrates says justice is concerned with "what is inside…It means that he

[8] Plato, *The Republic*, trans. C.D.C. Reeve, (Hackett Publishing, 2004), 370a10-b1.

does not allow the elements in him each to do the job of some other, or the three sorts of elements in him to meddle with one another." It is this internal justice, which looks to each individual nature of a person, that sets up the foundation of external justice, which is what Socrates outlines in the *Kallipolis*. For Socrates, the idea of justice follows one long string beginning within one individual and extending outward to the justice found in a political community as a plurality of natures coming together.

In Book Five of the *Republic*, Plato outlines the selective breeding process that the philosopher-kings will implement in the *Kallipolis*. Socrates tells Glaucon that by breeding the guardian class so that sexual intercourse is only allowed at certain times of the year, determined by a secretly rigged lottery pairing up individuals with compatible natures, all decided by the rulers. The children will be raised together, ignorant of their parentage. In the case of illegal sexual intercourse, undesignated by the rulers, and the production of offspring, that child will ultimately be killed. In explaining the purposes of this early account of eugenic policy, Socrates says that the guardian race must "remain pure" in order "to make the city the happiest possible, rather than looking to any one group within it and molding it for happiness."[9] The purpose of genetically conditioning the guardians is to create the "best" possible guardians. Such guardians are not guided by desire (i.e., the guardians who cannot control their sexual urges and fornicate without permission). The ability of the philosopher-kings to use this logic to carry out state-sanctioned eugenics in the Kallipolis becomes relevant when Arendt discusses why violence can–sometimes– be logical.

Recall the idea of "man, the maker" and how the tools of *homo faber* divide humans from the realm of nature or labor. Arendt distinguishes between two types of violence: the animal

[9] Ibid., 460c6, 466a3-4.

violence that stems from rage or another emotion, and the violence that is "inherent in all activities of making, fabricating, and producing."[10] Because the *homo faber* is, first and foremost, a creator, Arendt sees violence as being inherent to creation because it inevitably entails the destruction of some other substance. In her definition of violence, Arendt asserts that violence "is rational to the extent that it is effective in reaching the end that must justify it…only if it pursues short-term goals."[11]

Returning to Plato's *Kallipolis*, the philosopher-king becomes somewhat of a toolmaker in the capacity of creating and managing institutions of politics, education, and mating. What was once a biological drive to procreate becomes manufactured by the rulers in an attempt to sterilize and control a part of nature to create something perhaps not entirely removed from nature, but is now changed by human intervention. Interestingly, Plato argues that this is necessary for the good of the whole city. With this utilitarian framework in mind, Arendt argues the exact opposite: "To expect people who have not the slightest notion of what the *res publica*, the public thing, is, to behave nonviolently… is neither realistic nor reasonable."[12] While Plato justifies violence with a utilitarian *telos*, Arendt rejects the possibility of utilitarian ends being compatible with violence.

The end of a theoretically "purer" race of guardians would justify the means of achieving it, but it is not the short-term goal that Arendt specifically ascribes this condition to. Moreover, Arendt is clear that violent actions are always marked with uncertainty; it is impossible to specifically predict the outcome of violent measures. She says that "the practice of violence, like all action, changes the world, but the most probable change is to a more violent world."[13]

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[10] Hannah Arendt, "What Is Authority?" in *Between Past and Future*, (Viking Press, 1961), 111.
[11] Hannah Arendt, *On Violence*, (Mariner Books, 1969), 79.
[12] Ibid., 78.
[13] Ibid., 80.

Comparatively, Plato delineates the predicted outcome of his eugenic policy. He says it will result in a "purer" Guardian class and a just city because the Guardian class will eventually become better suited to their task by the careful breeding of the virtue which is proper to it. Arendt, however, would argue that a result with such specification is extremely difficult to predict and impossible to justify.

Violence and the power imbalance inherent to it are thus capable of rationality, as is demonstrated in the thought of Aristotle and Plato. Both authors, however, situate their inclinations about natural differences to make assertions about how a city-state should be organized and, specifically, how people with differing natures should be organized. Arendt, on the other hand, recognizes these natural inclinations to violence as a part of all mankind, making judgments on the basis of plurality, not necessarily concerned with division. In discussion of biological justifications of violence, Arendt declares that "nothing could be more dangerous than the tradition of organic thought in political matters by which power and violence are interpreted in biological terms."[14] While both Plato and Arendt see reason as having a place in the action of violence, Plato justifies his violence by a utilitarian ideology grounded in biology, or perhaps, assumptions about biology. The role that reason has in violence is much more varied in Arendt's thought, while Plato does not see any injustice in this sort of eugenic violence. Arendt is not interested in moralizing violence by acknowledging its utility, she is aware how effective and successful violence can be in achieving its goals. Arendt is instead interested in diagnosing the different sorts of violence that are present in various parts of the human condition.

Arendt denies the complete irrationality of violence. To understand the nuanced idea of violence that challenges the general idea of violence, one must understand Arendt's third and

[14] Ibid., 75.

final component of the *vita activa*–action. Arendt marks action as the source of identity: "to act, in its most general sense, means to take an initiative, to begin."[15] It is the principal part with which identity and uniqueness come about and it is also marked by its unpredictability. Violence is an elusive thing in the *vita activa* because there is a necessary violence in biological processes, there is a utility to violence as a tool of the *homo faber*, and it is also unpredictable like action. Political violence, as is seen in Book 5 of Plato's *Republic*, is the sort of violence that one should understand through the lens of its utility. As Caroline Ashcroft says in *Violence and Power in the Thought of Hannah Arendt*, "Whereas some violence is indeed anti-political, there are also forms of violence that are politically neutral and forms that, if not political, are pro-political" in Hannah Arendt's thinking.[16]

The Extinction of *Homo Faber* and Plato's Constitutional Decline

This section builds further on the connections between the ideas of power and violence between Plato and Hannah Arendt. By comparing the similar models of a "decline" that Plato denotes in Book 8 and Arendt's anxiety about modernity's devaluation of the homo faber, I underscore the anxieties that have ruled political thinkers like Plato remain present in the contemporary world. The connection here is in a quality that they see as being the beginning of decline, namely, appetite, which should be regarded as a general term that encompasses biological processes, instincts, and necessities. This section begins with an overview of Book 8 of Plato's Republic, which details the decline of the Kallipolis. I compare this model of devolution to Arendt's ideas about modernity and the defeat of the homo faber.

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[15] Arendt, *Human Condition*, 177.
[16] Caroline Ashcroft, *Violence and Power in the Thought of Hannah Arendt* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2021), 15.

Understanding Plato's concept of the Forms is key to the following section. In Book 6, Socrates gives the audience an analogy to understand these abstract ideas, namely the Divided Line. He tells Glaucon to imagine a line divided into two parts. One part is the intelligible realm and the other is the visible realm. Socrates divides each section into two subsections, creating a total of four sections on the line. The first subsection of the visible realm contains images like shadows and reflections informed by imagination, the second subsection contains the originals of those images informed by belief. The first subsection of the intelligible realm contains things like algebra and geometry, which are informed by thought. The second subsection is the Forms, which is the good itself, it is entirely abstract and conceptual, informed by understanding. They cannot be seen or heard like objects in the physical realm because they belong to a different world, where they are timeless and perfect. The philosopher-kings are fit to rule because they love wisdom, but specifically, it is their love of wisdom that allows them to understand the Forms. The Forms are broad, but only their timeless characteristic is pertinent to the following section.

In Book 8 of the *Republic*, Plato outlines how the Kallipolis will eventually devolve into several different types of government. It begins when the philosopher-kings eventually make a mistake and choose ill-suited pairs who will produce inadequate children. Then, when these citizens begin to mix classes, hostility between and within the classes will rise. The decline transitions to a timocracy, an oligarchy, a democracy, and finally, a tyranny. The most pertinent to this paper is the transition from a democracy to a tyranny. This transition happens as the oligarchy's insatiable desire for wealth results in the poorer masses revolting against them. The democratic constitution is primarily concerned with freedom, and to Plato's dismay, it is an

unrestrained and excessive freedom that is present in this constitution.[17] The citizens are enslaved to their appetites and fear the threat of "having any master at all."[18] When the populace appoints one person to lead the revolt against the rich, that leader becomes a tyrant.

Arendt's perception of modernity is similar to Plato's prediction of constitutional decline. Arendt marks modernity by the rule of the *animal laborans* over the *homo faber*. She sees the rise of *animal laborans* as a threat to the *homo faber*. It is the loss of belief in immortality (the declining interest in the activity of the *homo faber*) and the value of labor over fabrication or action that has left the modern world with nothing but "appetites and desire, the senseless urges of his body which he mistook for passion."[19] The tragedy of modernity comes from the emphasis on labor over work and action. This has led to a society "whose only aim…was survival of the animal species man. None of the higher capacities of man was any longer necessary to connect individual life with the life of the species."[20] The necessity of the *homo faber* is linked to his creation of what Arendt calls the "common world." This is the world in which mankind is not only limited by nature but can create ideas, works, and institutions that are not necessitated by life-sustaining processes and thus are free from the world of labor. This is a world where creations offer stability and permanence to humanity. One example is art, whose "durability is of a higher order than that which all things need in order to exist at all; it can attain permanence throughout the ages."[21] The common world bears a resemblance to Plato's aforementioned reality of the Forms. They are not entirely similar in that the common world is not perfect or abstract, but both the reality of the Forms and Arendt's common world have the quality of permanence. While Plato would still see something like art as part of the visible realm, and not permanent at

[17] Plato, *Republic*, 557b4-6.
[18] Ibid., 563e1.
[19] Arendt, *Human Condtion*, 320-1.
[20] Ibid., 321.
[21] Ibid., 167.

all, Arendt's definition of permanence is less absolute. Both underscore a desirable good in the durable or long-lasting. To Arendt, the permanence that is provided by the *homo faber* is not absolutely eternal, but is desirable in its ability to provide stability for the world of mankind, "the non-mortal home for mortal beings" and so *non-mortal* is very different from *immortal*.[22] Non-mortal reality is neither eternal nor mortal. Plato's Forms are eternal and everlasting, but to an average human, a very long time can seem like an eternity. The Forms and the common world are not identical, but both deal with a faculty of higher reasoning, creativity, and long-lasting durability.

The common theme of the rise of uninhibited desires and the inability to see a higher ideal as a threat to the well-being of a political community is evident in both Plato and Arendt's works. A guide or solution to the realm of higher ideals is also present. Both authors underscore the decline of a society as being the result of individuals who value the baser instincts of their biology. In Plato's *Kallipolis*, it is the people who are controlled by their appetites, the people in the lowest class of the tripartite city, that ultimately spell out the ruin of a higher good. It is the sort of life that values activities and objects necessary to life that are incapable of pursuing a world beyond labor or necessity. Similar to the immortality of Plato's Forms, the common world highlights an aspect of permanence in both authors' conception of the highest good.

In both Arendt and Plato's works, the element of an "elevated figure" appears. This sort of quality or condition is characterized by an escape from some sort of enslavement by an ability to connect to a "higher" realm. For Plato, that escape is the ability to break free from the shackles of the cave and understand the Forms. It is the philosopher-king whose soul is led by reason and who can see beyond their desires and emotions, toward the intangible world of Forms. Arendt

[22] Ibid., 167.

sees this escape as mankind's ability to fabricate a common world that will survive beyond one's life. The creation of tools within a context not bound by nature makes a world where immortality is possible–not through biology but through the imbuing of institutions, objects, and ideas with life. The end that Plato seeks is justice, an ideal that belongs to the world of forms. The end that Arendt seeks is the common world—the only world in which immortality is possible.

Conclusion

In examining the philosophical parallels between Aristotle, Plato, and Hannah Arendt, it becomes clear that all three thinkers delve into violence and power. While their approaches diverge at times, it is apparent how the early ideas of natural power imbalances and ordering of human activity provided ample sustenance from which Arendt has criticized and/or reiterated their arguments. Plato's vision of the *Kallipolis* and its eventual deterioration underscores a utilitarian ideology where biological determinism and controlled breeding are justified by the pursuit of a higher societal good. In contrast, Arendt's analysis of work and labor reveals a more nuanced understanding that transcends simplistic biological imperatives. Both philosophers acknowledge the potential for human beings to transcend their base desires through connection to higher ideals—whether it be through the understanding of the Forms or the creation of a durable common world. Aristotle's earlier sentiments about natural slavery anchor Arendt's discussion of labor and humanity's enslavement to the biological processes. In sum, the ideas of ancient philosophers underscore longstanding questions of how society is and how it ought to be. Hannah Arendt and her writings are a testament to the durability of these questions.

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