

# Hannah Arendt

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## Thinking in Difficult Times

### 11. Alienation and the Modern Age





# Agenda

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- Three events that changed the world
- Descartes and the self
- World alienation: family, nation
- *Animal laborans vs homo faber*
- Functional behaviourism vs Thought





‘The modern age, with its growing world-alienation, has led to a situation where man, wherever he goes, encounters only himself. All the processes of the earth and the universe have revealed themselves as either man-made or as potentially man-made.

...This two-fold loss of the world – the loss of nature and the loss of human artifice in the widest sense, which would include all history – has left behind it a society of men who, without a common world which would at once relate and separate them, either live in desperate lonely separation or are pressed together into a mass. For a mass-society is nothing more than that kind of organized living which automatically establishes itself among human beings who are still related to one another but have lost the world once common to all of them.’ – Arendt, *Between Past and Future*

# The worldlessness of the modern age

- In *The Human Condition* (1958), Arendt sets out the tripartite nature of the *vita activa* (or active life), denigrated by western philosophy since Plato and the turn to the *vita contemplativa*
- Much of HC outlines the nature of its three modes: labour, work and action, with a heavy reliance on an idealised view of the Greek polis
- The final part turns to Arendt's Olympian diagnoses of the modern age, an era of thoughtlessness and empty materialism...





# The worldlessness of the modern age

Three events accelerated our modern age:

- 1) the discovery of America, and then of the whole earth;
- 2) the Reformation, which through expropriating ecclesiastical property, led to 'the twofold process of individual expropriation and the accumulation of social wealth', ending feudalism; and
- 3) the telescope and the perspective of the earth from the view of the universe, *sub specie aeternitas* (as Spinoza says)

Why would these discoveries alienate us from our world?

What is lost each time?







‘Nothing, to be sure, could have been more alien to the purpose of the explorers and circumnavigators of the early modern age than this closing-in process; they went to enlarge the earth, not shrink her into a ball, and when they submitted to the call of the distant, they had no intention of abolishing distance. Only the wisdom of hindsight sees the obvious, that nothing can remain immense if it can be measured, that every survey brings together distant parts and therefore establishes closeness where distance ruled before.’ (250)





‘the greater the distance between himself and his surroundings, world or earth, the more he will be able to survey and to measure and the less will worldly, earth-bound space be left to him. The fact that the decisive shrinkage of the earth was the consequence of the invention of the airplane, that is, of leaving the surface of the earth altogether, is like a symbol for the general phenomenon that any decrease of terrestrial distance can be won only at the price of putting a decisive distance between man and earth, of alienating man from his immediate earthly surroundings.’ (251)

‘Archimedes, in order that he might draw the terrestrial globe out of its place, and transport it elsewhere, demanded only that one point should be fixed and immoveable; in the same way, I shall have the right to have high hopes, if I am happy enough to discover one thing only which is certain and indubitable.’

- Descartes, Meditation 1





# Descartes and the self

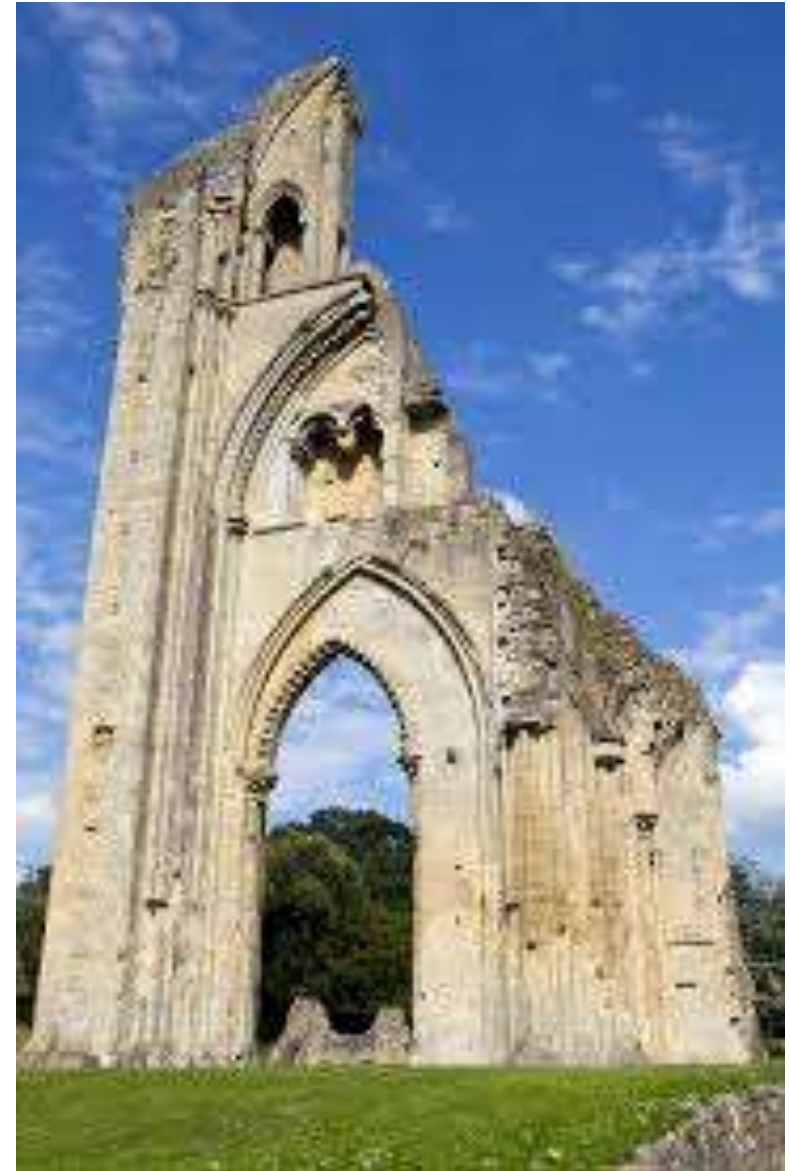
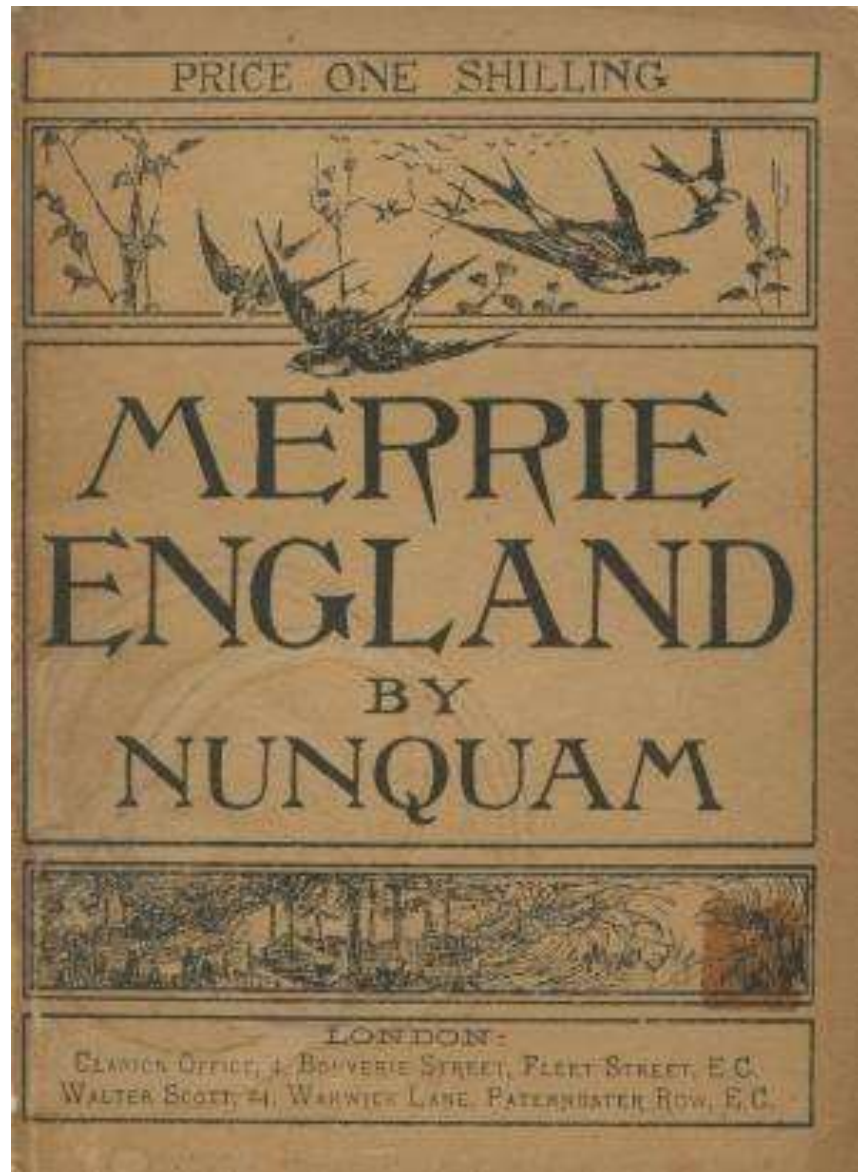
- Descartes' sceptical doubt of the external world, and his affirmation *I think therefore I am*, introduce an alienation from the world
- The Reformation also marks this, as the structures and wealth of the Catholic Church are dissolved, expropriated, overturning feudalism in the process
- This wealth becomes the basis of early capitalism, initiating a new logic of appropriation and accumulation for its own sake, dissolving individuality, family and community in the process...

# Over to you

In small groups, choose a question and discuss:

1. Wealth accumulation has led to two stages of world alienation, involving poverty and the social currents of the modern age. What exactly are they? Do you agree with Arendt's diagnosis? (256-7)
2. How does wealth accumulation and the alienation of the modern age reflect the decline of *homo faber*? Do you agree? (307-10)





‘Membership in a social class replaced the protection previously offered by membership in a family, and social solidarity became a very efficient substitute for the earlier, natural solidarity ruling the family unit ... just as the family unit had been identified with a privately owned piece of the world, its property, society was identified with a tangible, albeit collectively owned, piece of property, the territory of the nation-state, which until its decline in the twentieth century offered all classes a substitute for the privately owned home of which the class of the poor had been deprived.’ (256)

# STEP INTO YOUR PLACE





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For men cannot become citizens of the world as they are citizens of their countries, and social men cannot own collectively as family and household men own their private property. The rise of society brought about the simultaneous decline of the public as well as the private realm. But the eclipse of a common public world, so crucial to the formation of the lonely mass man and so dangerous in the formation of the worldless mentality of modern ideological mass movements, began with the much more tangible loss of a privately owned share in the world.’ (257)



‘Now what helps stimulate productivity and lessens pain and effort is useful. In other words, the ultimate standard of measurement is not utility and usage at all, but "happiness," that is, the amount of pain and pleasure experienced in the production or in the consumption of things’. (309)

‘his instrumentalization of the world, his confidence in tools and in the productivity of the maker of artificial objects; his trust in the all-comprehensive range of the means-end category, his conviction that every issue can be solved and every human motivation reduced to the principle of utility; his sovereignty, which regards everything given as material and thinks of the whole of nature as of "an immense fabric from which we can cut out whatever we want to resew it however we like"' (305)





# The rise of *animal laborans*

- The scientific breakthroughs of the 17<sup>th</sup> century at first led to the elevation of *homo faber* (man the maker)
- The world could be understood, transformed, subjected to universal laws of nature and bent to Man's will. Utilitarianism triumphs...
- Instead, *animal laborans* triumphs, as capitalism converts objects into exchange value, not use-value
- While ideas about the significance of individual mortality are relegated in contrast to overwhelming laws of Nature and History
- Life becomes the highest good, merely the biological continuity of one's own life or that of one's family





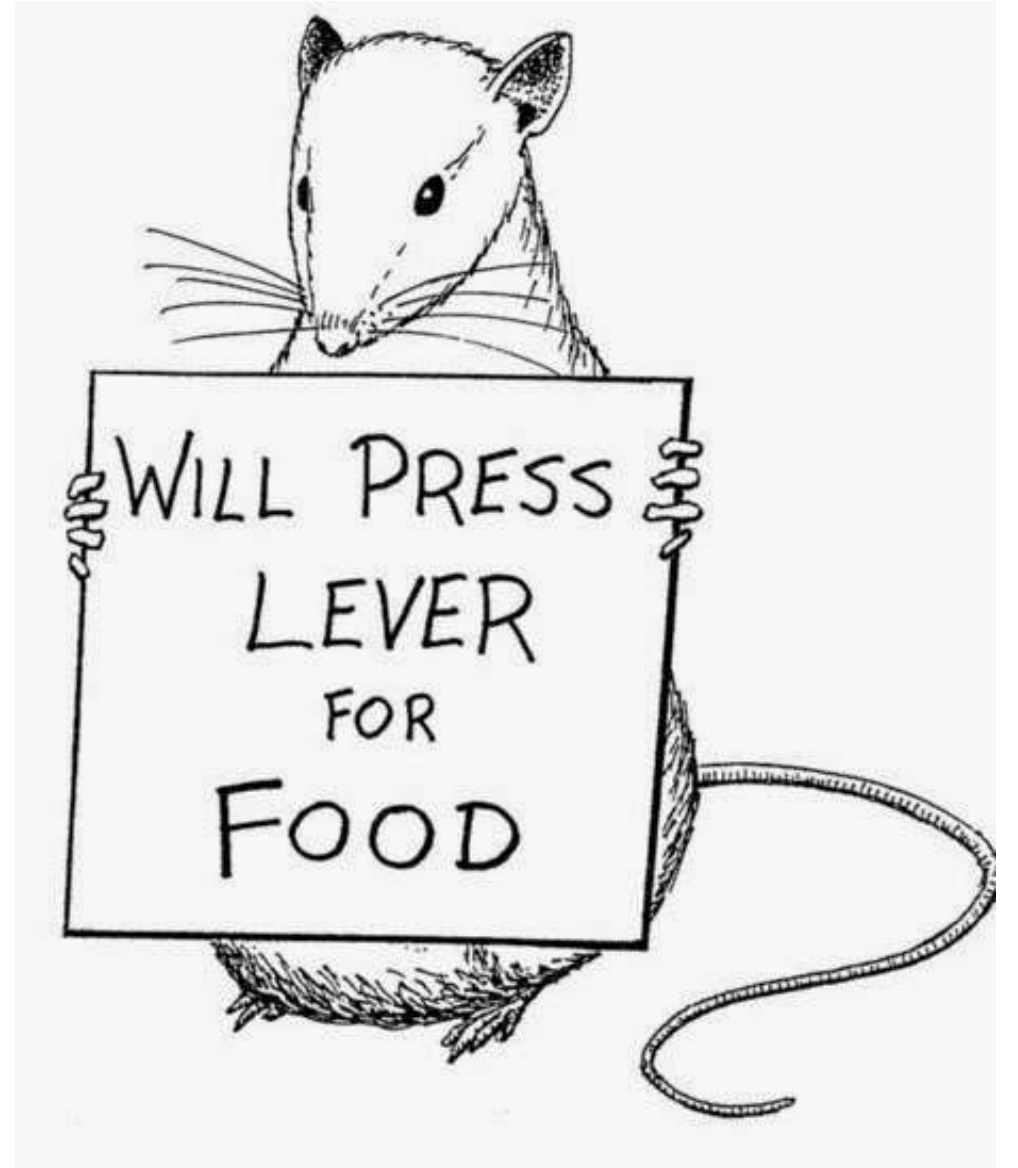


‘What was left was a "natural force," the force of the life process itself, to which all men and all human activities were equally submitted ... and whose only aim, if it had an aim at all, was survival of the animal species man.’

‘What was not needed, not necessitated by life's metabolism with nature, was either superfluous or could be justified only in terms of a peculiarity of human as distinguished from other animal life – so that Milton was considered to have written his *Paradise Lost* for the same reasons and out of similar urges that compel the silkworm to produce silk.’ (321)

# Over to you

1. Arendt concludes that we're threatened by a world of functional behaviourism and sterile passivity. Why does she argue this, and do you accept it? (322)
2. The final sentences make a late appeal to the power of thinking within the *vita activa* (324). What does this appeal tell us about Arendt's broader approach to politics and philosophy?





‘The last stage of the laboring society, the society of jobholders, demands of its members a sheer automatic functioning, as though individual life had actually been submerged in the overall life process of the species and the only active decision still required of the individual were to let go, so to speak, to abandon his individuality, the still individually sensed pain and trouble of living, and acquiesce in a dazed, "tranquilized," functional type of behavior.

The trouble with modern theories of behaviorism is not that they are wrong but that they could become true, that they actually are the best possible conceptualization of certain obvious trends in modern society. It is quite conceivable that the modern age – which began with such an unprecedented and promising outburst of human activity-may end in the deadliest, most sterile passivity history has ever known.’ (322)



‘For if no other test but the experience of being active, no other measure but the extent of sheer activity were to be applied to the various activities within the *vita activa*, it might well be that thinking as such would surpass them all. ... Never is he more active than when he does nothing, never is he less alone than when he is by himself.’







## Rounding up on *The Human Condition*

- Arendt foresees a world without thought, devoid of action and personality, as the complexity and spontaneity of human life is reduced to mere life processes and endless accumulation
- Only the artists and the scientists are in a position to act, through their common institutions and continued exploration of ideas
- Politics has become reduced to the top-down administration of private interests. 'Society' has replaced 'the political', and without public spaces and centres of ideas and debate, action is endangered
- *On Revolution* will follow, making the case for political spaces and constitution-making which might re-energise a stale politics...

## Next week... *The Life of the Mind*

It's our last week, and we'll round up at the end of Arendt's life:

- *The Life of the Mind*, of which two of three parts were complete, and *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy* (1970), a lecture course in which she introduces her theory of judgement
- Please read the Intro to *Life of the Mind* and last chapter of Book 1, and the Seventh Session of the Lectures on an 'enlarged mentality'
- What is the status and power of thinking in the modern age?
- How do we put Arendt to use in an era of rampant lies, societal breakdown and political fragmentation?