Architecture is an art because it is interested not only in the original need for shelter but also in putting together spaces and materials in a meaningful manner. This occurs through formal and actual joints. (Marco Frascari 1984, 23)

But architecture has also maintained a crucial and confusing permeability because biological life, in order to survive, has always required something like a free passage between inside and outside; some vital movement from protected to open air. I am not speaking metaphorically or poetically. Buildings require literal doors and windows; and architecture requires both literal and symbolic openings; these openings are an integral part of any architectural treatment of its interior space and its boundaries. (Catherine Ingraham 2006, 7)

Arendt’s Work:
On the Architecture of
*The Human Condition*

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1.

The title of this essay is meant to provoke. Why on earth give pride of place to such terms as “work” and “architecture” in a study of *The Human Condition*—the book in which Hannah Arendt so forcefully condemned traditional political philosophy for misconceiving action as a kind of making? Alone in his workshop, Arendt writes, *homo faber* is “lord and master” over his materials, shaping them in accordance with a model he has chosen in advance; but she insists that to treat politics in these terms—as a field for the exercise of a form-giving sovereignty, through which human affairs might be made as solid and durable as an artist’s productions—is to erode the conditions for genuine political freedom (Arendt 1958, 144, 220–30). Where work is solitary, action happens in public and in the plural; where work involves the execution of a plan, action is unpredictable; where work aims at producing a lasting result, action’s ephemeral words and deeds, undertaken for their own sake, “exhaust their full meaning in the performance itself” (206). It is famously difficult, beyond this point, to secure agreement about just what Arendtian action is, but she seems perfectly clear about what it is not; and this—the recovery of a concept of action sharply distinguishable both from productive work and from necessary labor—is widely understood to be *The Human Condition*’s central contribution to political thought.

In this essay, I hope to show that this picture is, if not exactly wrong, then partial to the point of distortion. Among other things, it impoverishes our sense of the place of such phenomena as art and culture in Arendt’s political thought; and it also obscures the most radical aspects of the very element of her political theory that it celebrates—her critique of the “substitution of making for acting” (1958, 220). It does all this, I shall suggest, because it relies on an analogously partial understanding of the nature and function of the distinctions between “labor,” “work,” and “action” that structure the central chapters of *The Human Condition*.

The perplexing character of these terms will be nothing new to any reader of Arendt’s book, or of the body of commentary that has grown up around it. On the one hand, given Arendt’s concern that the tradition of Western political theory has “blurred the distinctions and articulations” among these three constituent elements of what she calls the *vita activa* (1958, 17), and that this blurring has contributed somehow to the invasion of the public sphere by the expansive conformism of “the social,” it is hard to resist seeing labor, work and action in what I shall call “territorial” terms—as disjunctive categories into which individual instances of human activity can be sorted, each of which properly belongs to a separate domain, whose boundaries must be secured for the sake of resurrecting and preserving the especially fragile and valuable experience of action in particular (Kateb 1984; Villa
Yet the resulting insistence on the separateness and autonomy of action has also seemed, even to sympathetic readers, to risk reducing action to a kind of “empty posturing,” purified not only of contamination by necessity and instrumentality, but also of the content that might give it significance. As Hanna Pitkin famously worried, Arendt’s “way of trying to protect and revive the public succeeds only in making its real value incomprehensible to us” (Pitkin 1981, 340–41; see also Kateb 1984, 16–22; Benhabib 2000, xlv and chap. 5).

In response to this problem, many of Arendt’s interpreters have tried to salvage the concepts of labor, work, and action by exploiting her own ambiguity about their status: do they refer, as one early reviewer of *The Human Condition* asked, to “three distinct classes of activities” or to “three elements that can be found, at least potentially, in any activities” (Frankel 1959, 422)? If we follow the second route and read Arendt’s conceptual triad as a distinction between “attitudes” or “ideal types” or useful “abstractions,” these readers propose, we can preserve the analytic force of Arendt’s distinctions while acknowledging the overlap of labor, work and action in the “welter of worldly activity”—as Arendt herself occasionally does, for instance when she portrays the world of action as something that “overgrows” the world of work, rather than as a delicate flower that can thrive only in its own bed (1958, 183).²

Like these readers, I find the territorial understanding of the conceptual architecture of *The Human Condition* problematic, and for similar reasons. But I respond to this problem differently, because the strategy of reading Arendt’s terms as abstractions of one kind or another leaves certain critical questions unanswered. First, although such interpretations of Arendt’s distinction are by no means textually baseless, they are—often avowedly—textually selective: they ask us simply to set aside those passages in *The Human Condition* in which Arendt’s drive toward territorial purification seems strongest—as when, early in the book (in a passage to which I shall return) she declares that “each human activity points to its proper location in the world” (1958, 73). But to do this is to miss the opportunity to ask about the significance of the coexistence, within a single text, of highly territorial formulations like these with others that cut against them. Is this merely a symptom of Arendt’s confusion, which we can resolve on her behalf by being clearer than she was? Or can we learn something from the specific ways in which these seemingly contradictory formulations appear and interact in the text of *The Human Condition*? Second, these interpretive strategies make Arendt’s distinctions more supple by narrowing their scope: they tell us that she means to separate labor, work, and action as attitudes or as concepts, and it distinguishes this sort of separation from the literal segregation of activities, agents, or spaces.
But to say this is still to treat Arendt’s distinctions as, at some level, territorial. It begs the question of whether the work performed by Arendt’s distinctions is always and only the work of separation, of establishing and enforcing impassable boundaries between spaces—whether those spaces are literal or figurative, concretely social or merely conceptual.

In what follows, I attempt a more radical reconsideration of the architecture of The Human Condition by pursuing these questions through a close reading of several key parts of Arendt’s book. I hope to make at least a preliminary case for the following conclusions. First: the conceptual triad of labor, work, and action is best understood not as a single, functionally continuous three-part distinction, but rather as the fraught conjunction of two different pairs of concepts—labor and work, and work and action—which operate in very different ways and serve quite different purposes in Arendt’s book. In short: work is not to action as labor is to work. In the early chapters of The Human Condition, and especially in the chapter entitled “Labor,” where Arendt most forcefully distinguishes labor from work, Arendt’s distinctions indeed seem to be meant primarily to do the work of separation, to guard against the transgression of boundaries; as the book proceeds, however—and especially over the course of the critical chapter on “Work”—this first, “territorial” architecture is partially displaced by another, which I shall call “relational.” If, at the first juncture, Arendt responds to the threat of territorial transgression by building a wall, at the second juncture Arendt also responds to a somewhat different threat—the threat of reductionism, of the impoverishment of relationships among concepts or phenomena; and she does so by investigating the lines of connection and interdependence that tie things together.

This first conclusion immediately suggests a second: the concept of work plays a unique role in Arendt’s scheme, because it is the point at which her two pairs of concepts meet, and at which the structure of the book, like a Möbius strip, twists over on itself. To put it controversially, judged in terms of the amount of weight it bears in the book, work and not action is the most important concept in The Human Condition. For the same reason, however, it is also probably the most difficult of Arendt’s concepts to grasp, because, as we shall see, the meaning of “work” itself changes over the course of the chapter that bears its name, as Arendt turns her attention from the distinction between labor and work to the articulation of work and action—a joint that she explores in the dense but crucial final section of that chapter, on the “work of art.” And these aspects of Arendt’s treatment of work, in turn, cast surprising new light on her critique of the “substitution of making for acting.” Far from merely reflecting Arendt’s hostility to the supposedly antipolitical characteristics of fabrication, I’ll propose that critique is undertaken
as much in defense of a rich, non-reductive understanding of work and its objects, and of their significance for action and politics, as in defense of action itself. On this reading, *The Human Condition* doesn’t celebrate a pure, rarefied, and frustratingly contentless domain of action; instead, it tries to reintegrate human activity understood instrumentally and human activity understood as meaningful performance, and it does this in part by denying what it is often taken to affirm—that work can adequately be grasped as the sovereign production of useful, physically durable objects.

One way to pursue these issues would be to consider the history of Arendt’s own work on the project that eventually became *The Human Condition*, because that history lends support to both of the conclusions I have just sketched. 4 While it’s natural to imagine that Arendt’s triad of labor, work, and action arose as a unified response to a single question—what are the basic dimensions of human activity?—in fact Arendt did not come to this scheme all at once. In and immediately after the first edition of *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, published in 1951, Arendt had approached the issue of the fate of political freedom in the modern world in binary terms, contrasting political life with natural life, and interpreting totalitarianism as a reduction of juridical persons to merely natural beings (Arendt 1951, 423). 5 This binary framework might be said to have anticipated the poles of labor and action in *The Human Condition*, insofar as labor is the activity most closely tied to the natural necessities of bodily reproduction, and action is the activity most closely associated with politics. 6 But where was work in this scheme? Everywhere and nowhere. Work was everywhere, in the sense that the phenomenon of making turned up on both sides of the binary structure of promise and threat around which *Origins* was built, without ever becoming the object of sustained theoretical reflection: at times, work appeared as the delicate layer of artificiality that made politics possible; at times, work appeared as the impulse toward mastery that drove the destructive resentment towards everything merely given. 7 And work was nowhere, because the “unusual” distinction between labor and work (1958, 79) wasn’t yet part of Arendt’s vocabulary in *Origins*. Her discovery of that distinction in early 1952, as she was beginning a new period of research on the history and sociology of labor, disrupted the terms in which she had been thinking about the problem of action and its conditions up to that point—terms that had been drawn largely from her reading of Marx against the background of the tradition of Western political philosophy—and compelled her to come to terms with the specificity, but also the uneasy double-facedness, of a category that had, as it were, erupted in the middle of her older, binary conceptual framework. 8 Although I do not pursue this historical story any further here, I mention these details because they underscore the functionally discontinuous
nature of the triad of labor, work, and action—it was the *separateness* of labor and work that drew Arendt’s attention to the *relatedness* of work and action—and because they suggest that we can see Arendt’s path towards and through *The Human Condition* as, in part, as a struggle to figure out how to make sense of the complex phenomenon of work in particular. In the rest of this essay, I focus on the text of *The Human Condition* itself—but, with this history in mind, I approach the book less as a snapshot of Hannah Arendt’s theoretical position at a single moment in time than as the record of an extended event, the document of Arendt’s attempt to do something in thought and in words, which is all the more theoretically fertile precisely because it does not finally smooth over but remains deeply and visibly marked by the twists and turns her thinking followed. What is true of work in Arendt, in other words—that it cannot fully be understood in terms of the masterful production of a solid object according to a plan laid out in advance—is also true of Arendt’s work.

If there is anything like a standard reading of *The Human Condition*, it is safe to say that it is built around the theme of separation. The point of the book, we all know, is to divide things that have been blurred together inappropriately, to recover a lost sense of the differences among labor, work, and action, and, especially, to summon us to defend the possibility of action against the threats posed by the dominance, and invasiveness, of *animal laborans* and *homo faber*—a defense that is, at the same time, a defense of the separation between the public and private realms against its modern erosion. There is a reason that this general picture of *The Human Condition* has had so much power: it captures something true and important about the book. One would have to work hard to miss the territorial impulse in the text, and especially in its punchy, programmatic opening chapters. So to provide a counterweight to, as well as a point of departure for, the effort at complication I shall later undertake, I want to begin by recalling three of the places at which the territorial architecture of *The Human Condition* is most clearly visible.

Arendt begins the first and shortest chapter of the *The Human Condition* with a summary statement of the meaning of the terms “labor,” “work,” and “action”; then, after an important account of the meaning of the term “condition” and the difference between the human condition and human nature, she devotes a section to “the term *vita activa*.” That term had been Arendt’s original title for the book—it would be restored to the German-language version—and so Arendt’s discussion of her departure from the traditional use of “*vita activa*” quickly becomes a larger statement of aims. “*Vita activa*,” Arendt observes, was the conventional medieval rendering of Aristotle’s term “*bios politikos*”; but the two terms reflected substantially different experiences.
of, and perspectives on, human activity: whereas Aristotle’s “bios politikos” was specifically a life of politics and action, the medieval “vita activa” could refer to “all kinds of active engagement in the things of this world”—not because “work and labor had risen in the hierarchy of human activities,” but because all human activity, including action, had come to be regarded “from the viewpoint of the absolute quiet of contemplation” (1958, 13–15). That transformation had two pernicious and interrelated consequences: it made human activity seem inferior, valuable only insofar as it could “serve the needs and wants of contemplation” (16); and it “blurred the distinctions and articulations within the vita activa itself,” since from the point of view of contemplation, labor, work, and action are more or less interchangeable instances of unquiet subservience to “the necessities of earthly life” (14–16). Arendt’s twofold aim, then, is to contest the “hierarchical order” implied in the distinction between the vita contemplativa and the vita activa, and to recover the “distinctions and articulations” that have been obscured by the “enormous weight of contemplation in the traditional hierarchy” (17).

In the second chapter of *The Human Condition, “The Public and the Private Realm,”* Arendt deepens her story, attending in more detail to the shifting institutional and practical matrices that lie behind the changes in vocabulary she has already mentioned. Just as the rendering of bios politikos as vita activa effaced the specificity of politics and action, so too did the translation of zoon politikon by animal socialis (1958, 23); and this linguistic confusion of the political and the social serves as the point of departure for Arendt’s extended discussion of the “decisive division between the public and the private realms” and the erosion of this division in modernity (28). For the Greeks, the experience of the significance of politics and of action was rooted in the separation of the household, a space devoted to fulfilling the necessities of life and governed by “the strictest inequality,” from the polis, a setting for free interaction among equals (32). The modern “rise of the social,” by contrast, names a constellation of developments—including the growth of large-scale markets and the commodification of labor; the corresponding preoccupation of nation-states with economic imperatives; and the growth of a spirit of conformism that helps reduce human activity to scientifically predictable and administratively tractable “behavior”—which, taken together, have broken down the old distinction between public and private, giving rise to a “new realm,” in which the labor and the life process, once confined to the household, have become the focus of (what can no longer properly be called) public concern (45). Arendt’s emphasis on the expansive, transgressive qualities of the social realm, which she says has an “irresistible tendency to grow, to devour the older realms of the political and the private” (45), underscores her own role as a drawer of boundaries, recovering the language
we will need if we are to separate what has been run together, or even to comprehend and name our loss. And what needs to be kept within appropriate boundaries is not just the social, but, ultimately, the three fundamental activities of labor, work, and action themselves. As Arendt concludes in the final section of the second chapter, in a passage that joins her discussion of public and private to the material that follows it: “The most elementary meaning of the two realms [of public and private] indicates that there are things that need to be hidden and others that need to be displayed publicly if they are to exist at all. If we look at these things, regardless of where we find them in any given civilization, we shall see that each human activity points to its proper location in the world. This is true for the chief activities of the vita activa, labor, work, and action . . . ” (73; my emphasis).

The recovery of the distinguishing features of the basic human activities thus begins in earnest in the third chapter of The Human Condition, on “Labor,” in which Arendt introduces, defends, and explores the consequences of what she admits—or, perhaps, boasts—is a highly unorthodox distinction between “labor” and “work.” Labor, Arendt has already indicated, “is the activity which corresponds to the biological process of the human body, whose spontaneous growth, metabolism, and eventual decay are bound to the vital necessities produced and fed into the life process by labor” (1958, 7). Its rhythm is repetitive, bound to the cycles of biological life; it is therefore not linear but processual, and it produces no lasting object as its result. (Importantly, this processual character, and the fact that it “leaves nothing behind” [87], are features that labor will later turn out to share with action.) Work, by contrast, breaks out of the cyclical time of labor: it is the activity through which human beings fabricate a world of durable objects, and its orientation toward a “finished product” is reflected in the dual use of the word “work”—but not “labor”—to refer both to the activity of making and the thing made (80). This distinction between labor and work was “overlooked in ancient times” (81), and neither the modern political economists nor, especially, Marx do any better than their predecessors. Instead, Arendt claims, Marx’s thought represents an unstable mixture of three elements: the modern elevation of the vita activa over the vita contemplativa, to which it had traditionally been subordinated (85); the persistence of the old tendency to flatten out the differences among human activities, albeit now “in favor of labor” (90); and, in some tension with this, the persistence of the ancient contempt for labor, reflected in Marx’s optimism (though not only his) about the capacity of technology to emancipate humanity from labor itself (104, 130–31). The result is tragic: “in all stages of his work,” Arendt says, Marx “defines man as an animal laborans and then leads him into a society in which this greatest and most human power is no longer necessary” (105). The lack
of an appropriate separation between labor and work thus contributes to what Arendt had called, in the Prologue, the “prospect of a society of laborers without labor, that is, without the only activity left to them” (5).

Together, these opening chapters give us a vivid picture of the territorial architecture of *The Human Condition*. They show us an Arendt who is concerned with building walls that separate and enclose concepts and domains, the better to conserve the experiences appropriate to each: as she says in the chapter on the public and the private, without the “wall-like law” of the city state, “a public realm could no more exist than a piece of property without a fence to hedge it in; the one harbored and inclosed political life as the other sheltered and protected the family” (1958, 64). Indeed, it is worth lingering over the idea of Arendt’s conceptual distinctions as walls, and of Arendt herself as a builder or architect (although the difference between these is important, and I shall return to it later). That image brings into the foreground the doubled weight borne by the labor-work distinction, and by the phenomenon of work whose specificity that distinction first reveals, in Arendt’s book. Formally, work seems to be the concept with the closest connection to Arendt’s own theoretical activity: as a boundary-setter and wall-builder, Arendt herself performs something analogous to what *homo faber* performs with stone and wood, giving durable form to the materials on which she works, transforming her thoughts into “tangible objects which, like the written page or the printed book, become part of the human artifice” (76, see also 90–91). And substantively, work is also the specific activity that stands between and separates labor and action—two activities that, as we have already seen, are so perilously similar in their processual structure and lack of durable results that the former threatens to swallow up the latter unless they are held apart. Work, we might say, both builds and is the barrier between them.

3.

I have already intimated that this picture of work as an impenetrable wall will not survive the pressure it is subject to in the chapter of *The Human Condition* that Arendt devotes to this activity—which is also the chapter in which these resonances between what Arendt is saying, and what she is doing in saying it, will prove most consequential. But before turning to that chapter I want to note two ways in which, even in the material we have already considered, we can see some lines of tension that anticipate the more substantial transformations to come. Recall, first, how Arendt explained the traditional neglect of the inner divisions and articulations of the *vita activa*. The blurring of those boundaries, she said, was the result of the subordination of the *vita activa* to the *vita contemplativa*: when compared to the silent contemplation of the eternal, the activities of labor, work, and action seemed like
nothing more than varieties of unquiet or askholia. Put this way, it may sound as though Arendt’s story is fundamentally about the betrayal of politics by philosophy, and indeed, in The Human Condition and elsewhere Arendt does identify the beginning of the “tradition of political thought” with the “trial of Socrates” and the consequent inauguration of “the conflict between the philosopher and the polis” (1958, 12). But things are not quite so straightforward, for the philosophical preference for contemplation can also be understood—indeed, Arendt herself sometimes portrays it—as a radicalization of a tendency already present within the polis; a tendency, in fact, that was a central part of the same “Greek understanding of polis life” that the development of political philosophy subsequently distorted and obscured (13).10

When, in the first chapter of The Human Condition, Arendt contrasts the term vita activa to the Aristotelian term bios politikos it was used to translate, she emphasizes that the bios politikos referred specifically to the “action, [or] praxis” characteristic of the political world: “neither labor nor work was considered to possess sufficient dignity to constitute a bios at all, an autonomous and authentically human way of life; since they served and produced what was necessary and useful, they could not be free, independent of human needs and wants” (1958, 13). In capturing and preserving this contrast between free action and the necessities of life, Arendt seems to think, Aristotle was expressing a point of view implicit in the organization of the polis and the self-understanding of its citizens, even though his political philosophy also participated (like Plato’s) in the elevation of the vita contemplativa over the vita activa.11 And that point of view, focused on the need to protect a space for political action uncontaminated by labor and work, is not just opposed to but informs and anticipates the more radical pursuit of pure freedom expressed in the philosophical turn to contemplation, and subsequently in Christian otherworldliness. Arendt hints at this continuity in the first chapter of The Human Condition when she says that “to the ancient freedom from the necessities of life and from compulsion by others, the philosophers added”—added, not opposed—“freedom and surcease from political activity” (14). She makes the continuity more explicit in the chapter on “Labor,” when, in explaining why “the distinction between labor and work was ignored in classical antiquity,” she writes:

The differentiation between the private household and the public political realm, between the household inmate who was a slave and the household head who was a citizen, between activities which should be hidden in private and those which were worth being seen, heard, and remembered, overshadowed and predetermined all other distinctions until only one criterion was left: is the greater amount of time and effort spent in private or in public? is the occupation motivated by cura privati negotii or cura rei publicae, care
for private or for public business? With the rise of political theory, the philosophers overruled even these distinctions, which had at least distin-
guished between activities, by opposing contemplation to all kinds of activ-
ity alike. With them, even political activity was leveled to the rank of neces-
sity, which henceforth became the common denominator of all articula-
tions within the *vita activa*. (Arendt 1958, 85)

In short, if “the enormous weight of contemplation in the traditional hierar-
chy has blurred the distinctions and articulations within the *vita activa* itself,”
leading to the occlusion of the distinctiveness and value of action and polit-
ics (17), something similar was also true of the ideology of the Greek *polis*,
in which the enormous weight of *action* in the hierarchy of activities had
already blurred the crucial distinction between labor and work even before
philosophy came on the scene.12 This does not mean, of course, that Arendt
ultimately holds the self-understanding of the Greek *polis*, rather than polit-
ical philosophy, responsible for the eclipse of action. But it does indicate that,
even as Arendt was drawn to the Greek pursuit of freedom through the ter-
ritorial purification of the public realm of the contaminating elements of
labor and work, she was also sensitive to the possibility that this pursuit had
had unintended and unfortunate consequences—that it had, in some ways,
worked against itself.13

The beginnings of a second fracture in Arendt’s territorial architecture
can be found in the chapter on “The Public and the Private Realm.” In the
brief reading of this chapter sketched earlier, I portrayed “The Public and the
Private Realm” as an exposition of the fundamental difference between these
two domains, an account of the modern “rise of the social” that has invaded
both realms, and an affirmation of the importance of determining the proper
“location” of each of the fundamental human activities. This is right, but it is
also a distortion, not least because it leaves out nearly half the chapter. It is
worth rehearsing that chapter’s structure. “The Public and the Private Realm”
consists of seven sections. The first two sections discuss the mistranslation of
*zôon politikon* as *animal socialis* and unpack the Greek understanding of the dif-
ference between public and private, *polis* and household, that that translation
obscured; the third recounts the growth of the boundary-transgressing
“social” in modernity. Arendt’s discussion of the “location of human activi-
ties,” however, does not immediately follow these three sections. Instead,
Arendt follows this first statement of the relationship between public and pri-
ivate with three further sections that significantly recast that relationship.

In particular, in these later sections Arendt shifts her focus from what she
calls the “privative” aspect of “privacy”—the sense that to live a private life,
a life without action or outside the *polis*, meant to be “deprived of some-
thing” of the highest value (1958, 38)—and toward a sense of “privacy” that
is neither privative nor strictly opposed to publicity. This is the sense of privacy associated with property (61). Private property, Arendt is at pains to explain, is altogether different from private wealth; indeed, she suggests that the modern valorization of “privately owned wealth” has lent legitimacy to a destructive and expropriative process of capital accumulation that “has never shown much consideration for private property,” properly understood (66–67). The privacy of property, for Arendt, refers not to the right of an individual to accumulate and dispose of goods without interference, but to the possession of a place: “originally,” she says, “the privacy of property meant no more or less than to have one’s location in a particular part of the world and therefore to belong to the body politic, that is, to be the head of one of the families which together constituted the public realm” (61; my emphasis).

Notably, it is here—in her account of the (non-privative) private as a constituent of the public, and not in her earlier account of the (privative) private as the opposite of the public—that Arendt talks explicitly of walls and boundaries, and her example here is not, in the first instance, the walls (whether of stone or of law) that enclose the core territory of the polis and fortify it against enemies, but the walls that enclose each household, separating it from others and from the public space of the polis (1958, 63). Crucially, the function of these walls is not only to enclose and separate the private and the public; it is also to connect the private to the public. Citing Fustel de Coulanges, Arendt notes “an ancient Greek law according to which two buildings were never permitted to touch” (63 n. 64; Fustel de Coulanges 1980, 55); and while this space between houses may not itself have been public—Arendt calls it a “kind of no man’s land”—it did help to ensure that the exterior face of the wall enclosing each private domain would be publicly visible, that it would “appear in the realm of the city” (1958, 63) rather than simply join one house immediately to another. And if the outer face of the wall around the private realm was publicly visible, then so too was anyone who passed through this wall, as the citizen-householder did whenever he left his “location” and entered the polis.

Against this background, Arendt’s discussion of “the location of human activities” in the final section of the chapter becomes crucially ambiguous. On the one hand, as we have seen, when Arendt says that “each human activity points to its proper location in the world,” this can—indeed, it must—be read to suggest that a “location” is a place to which an activity is to be tied, fixed, or confined. That is its function in Arendt’s territorial architecture, and that reading is supported by the example Arendt offers here: the “admittedly extreme” example of “the activity of goodness,” which she says must be kept hidden if it is to exist at all (1958, 73). But Arendt’s earlier introduction of the term “location” as a central part of her definition of private property is quite
different: there, to have a “location” that is one’s own or proper is not to be confined to that place absolutely. A location in this sense is an inner enclosure but it also has an exterior, publicly visible face, and the citizen who has a location regularly departs from it; indeed the function of that exterior face is to connect the private to the public and so to make the citizen’s departure and return possible. The same may be true for the “locations” of the various human activities: these locations may serve as much to relate activities as to separate them, indeed even to facilitate movement across their boundaries. Or, more precisely, this may become true as Arendt’s exposition itself moves from labor to work and toward action, twisting the structure of the book as it goes.

4.

The most important symptom of this torsion lies in a curiously little-noticed feature of the chapter of The Human Condition on “Work”; namely, the shift that takes place late in that chapter from an account of work centered on the production of useful objects, which occupies its first five sections, to an account of work centered on the production of works of art, which appears rather abruptly in the final section of the chapter, and is strikingly different in tone from what precedes it. In one sense there is no discontinuity involved in this shift: what useful objects and works of art share is that they are durable, at least when compared to the stuffs consumed by the life process and the fragile webs spun out by speech and action. But in another sense the change is radical. Arendt’s idea of work is commonly, and with good reason, associated with the phenomena of usefulness and instrumentality: as one reader puts it, work involves making “things, solid objects which are meant to last, to be used rather than consumed”; as another says, its characteristic attitude toward its “material,” including its human material, is “practical, aimed at the efficient achievement of some intended result” (Canovan 1992, 128; Pitkin 1998, 146). This seems true enough for the fabrication of objects of use; but Arendt announces at the beginning of the last section of the chapter that works of art are “strictly without any utility whatsoever” (1958, 167), and the attention to instrumentality and its paradoxes that had dominated the preceding five sections of the chapter is likewise absent from her discussion of art. Instead, this final section strains toward the vocabulary of the “Action” chapter: in the work of art, Arendt says, it as though “a premonition of immortality, not the immortality of the soul or of life but of something immortal achieved by mortal hands, has become tangibly present, to shine and to be seen, to sound and to be heard, to speak and to be read” (168).

We can begin to understand the significance of this seam in the text, and its relationship to the two lines of tension we have already identified, by reconstructing some of the substance of Arendt’s account of work in the first
five sections of the chapter. After reiterating the distinction between labor and work that the preceding chapter had discussed at length, Arendt devotes most of the first two sections to an exposition of the fundamental features of work, including the durability of the objects work creates (1958, 136); the violence inevitably involved in the worker’s activity of reification (139–40); the importance of the “model,” whether a mental image or a literal blueprint, that “guides the work of fabrication” (140ff); and the instrumental character of work, which is “entirely determined by the category of means and end,” in the sense that the activity of work has as its terminus and as its purpose a “piece of work,” an independent entity that will subsist after the activity has been completed (143). It is this last feature of work to which Arendt then devotes the next two sections of the chapter, for it turns out that the logic of instrumentality is the locus of a serious problem. And, importantly, this problem is not just one posed by work to other human activities—the problem, say, of the reduction of acting and speaking human beings to means of production, or of the “instrumentalization of the whole world and earth”—although this is certainly part of Arendt’s story (157). Instead, the problem with instrumentality also turns out to wreak havoc with the concept of work itself, and with the boundary Arendt had tried to establish between work and labor, making it difficult for work to perform the structural task Arendt had set for it.

The trouble with instrumentality, Arendt explains, is that the means–end relationship around which work is organized—the very relationship that makes work linear rather than cyclical, orienting it toward the production of finished objects—is prone to collapse back into the circularity that had been characteristic of labor. This vulnerability arises out of the intrinsic relativity of the end-orientation involved in the fabrication of use-objects. The product of work “is an end with respect to the means by which it is produced, and is the end of the fabrication process,” but “it never becomes, so to speak, an end in itself, at least not as long as it remains an object for use” (1958, 153). Instead, it becomes a means to a further end, either directly through use, as when one employs a chair for sitting, or indirectly, as when an object is brought to market and exchanged for some other useful item. “The trouble with the utility standard inherent in the very activity of fabrication,” she concludes, “is that the relationship between means and end on which it relies is very much like a chain whose every end can serve again as a means in some other context. In other words, in a strictly utilitarian world, all ends are bound to be of short duration and to be transformed into means for some further ends” (153–54). This “unending chain of means and ends” (154) erodes the supposedly firm boundary between labor and work, infusing work with a vicious circularity that mimics the natural circularity of biological life,
making work and its objects available to be understood as mere tools, and allowing processes—both the production process and the life process—to provide the standards (efficiency and happiness) that govern the increasingly undifferentiated field of activity made up of work and labor together. The inability of utilitarianism to put a stop to the cycle of means and ends thus contributes to what Arendt will call, in the last chapter of *The Human Condition*, “the defeat of *homo faber*” (305) and the “victory of the *animal laborans*” (320).

Of course, Arendt observes, there may seem to be an obvious response to this problem: the way to “end the chain of means and ends” is “to declare that one thing or another is an ‘end in itself’” (1958, 154). But Arendt rejects this strategy; and her critique, focused on Kant’s famous formulation of humanity as an end in itself, is telling. Kant’s purpose, she concedes, was noble enough: he “wanted first of all to relegate the means–end category to its proper place”—note the territorial language—“and prevent its use in the field of political action” (156). What he failed to realize was that his principle was in fact the consummation of instrumentalism, insofar as it segregated humanity, now understood as an ultimate end, from everything around it. On Kant’s account, Arendt writes, “the same operation which establishes man as the ‘supreme end’ permits him ‘if he can [to] subject the whole of nature to it,’ that is, to degrade nature and the world into mere means” (156; square brackets Arendt’s). (She is quoting, with extreme condensation, the section of the third *Critique* in which Kant characterizes humanity as a “final end”—that is, an end that depends on “no further condition” and about which “it cannot be further asked why . . . it exists.” “Without him [the human being],” Kant goes on, “the chain of ends subordinated to one another would not be completely grounded; and only in the human being, although in him only as a subject of morality, is unconditional legislation with regard to ends to be found, which therefore makes him alone capable of being a final end, to which the whole of nature is teleologically subordinated” [Kant 2000, 302–03 = Akad. 435–56].) The Kantian framework, in other words, cannot resolve the specific problem with instrumentality that Arendt identifies in the chapter on “Work”—namely, the tendency of work, understood in instrumental terms, to slide back in the direction of labor—because that framework recognizes no significant difference between the consumable resources of labor and the durable objects of work (that is, between “nature and the world”): what matters about them is that they are *all* only conditional ends, which depend for their value on their position in an “order of ends” that culminates in the noumenal aspect of humanity (Kant 2000, 302 = Akad. 435). In this respect, Arendt concludes, Kant falls back into a problem that Plato had diagnosed in the famous Protagorean saying that “man is the measure of
all use things (*chrêmata*).” He saw that “if man is the measure of all things, then
man is the only thing outside the means-end relationship, the only end in
himself who can use everything else as a means”; and this is why he replied—
though Arendt will not join him in this response—that “not man . . . but ‘the
god is the measure [even] of mere use objects’” (158, 157–59; square brack-
ets Arendt’s).

What is striking about this critique of the idea of an “end in itself” is its
echo of the first of the two lines of tension we have already identified in the
earlier chapters of *The Human Condition*. The effort to put a stop to the
vicious circle of means and ends by positing the existence of an end in itself,
conceived as separate from (and in need of protection against contamination
by) the domain of mere means, is structurally analogous to the Greek effort
to isolate a discrete domain of pure freedom that, on Arendt’s account, had
laid the groundwork for the neglect of the crucial difference between labor
and work, and eventually for the collapse of all three basic activities into a
single, undifferentiated *vita activa*. Indeed, the connection is more than ana-
logical, for Arendt positions the Greek contempt for instrumental work, the
classification of the “whole field of arts and crafts” as “*banausic,*” as a sort of
practical equivalent to the Platonic appeal to “the god”: both amount to
reactions against the Protagorean elevation of *homo faber* to an end in himself
(1958, 156–57). It is as though these two reactions against Protagoras, one
practical and one philosophical, though admirable in their sensitivity to the
dangers of the “generalization of the fabrication experience” (157), never-
theless reproduced one of the crucial flaws in the position against which they
were reacting: namely they conceive of their own favored ends in them-
selves—action in the *polis* and the experience of the eternal—as set apart
from, and over against, the other human activities (or, in Plato’s case, over
against activity as such) in the same way that *homo faber* had been set apart
from and over against nature and the world.

Arendt’s incisive critique of instrumentality thus leaves her in a difficult
position. She has discovered, first, that work, the very phenomenon on which
she had been depending to serve as a bulwark between labor and action, is
unsuitable to perform this task, at least insofar as it is conceived merely in
terms of the production of useful objects, because the very idea of use, with
its reference to means and ends, has a circular character that will tend to draw
work and its objects back into the processual whirlpool of labor. In short, the
wall between work and labor, and work itself conceived as a wall separating
two other domains, have turned out to be less solid than Arendt’s territorial
architecture would require. And she has also discovered, second, that what-
ever her own response to this conundrum, she will not be able to resolve the
problems posed by labor and work by making her own version of
Protagoras’s or Kant’s move, identifying some third domain of human activity that can be regarded in the same way as an end in itself, from which the other activities can be separated and to which they can be subordinated—which is, of course, how territorial readings of Arendt have always understood her conception of action.

It is against this background that Arendt turns in the dense last section of the chapter to the idea of the work of art, and it is over the course of this section that the architecture of The Human Condition undergoes its most significant shift. As I have indicated, Arendt begins the section by announcing that “human artifice” includes “a number of objects which are strictly without any utility whatsoever” (1958, 167); this language would seem to align Arendt unequivocally with the modern idea of the aesthetic as a highly differentiated domain of activity and experience that sits apart from and above the work-world devoted to the production, exchange, and use of everyday objects. But that would seem to be a version of the move she had just ruled out; and indeed Arendt had already registered a reservation about this understanding of the aesthetic when, in criticizing the Kantian idea of the “end in itself,” she noted in passing that his account of aesthetic experience as “pleasure without any interest” remained tied to the utilitarian perspective it purported to transcend and contain in just the same way as had his idea of humanity as an end in itself (156). Thus, by the end of the section, her language changes; indeed, the shift can be seen in a single sentence, on which the architecture of The Human Condition could be said to pivot: “To be sure,” she repeats, “an ordinary use object is not and should not be intended to be beautiful; yet whatever has a shape at all and is seen cannot help being either beautiful, ugly, or something in between.” Suddenly, the idea of the “work of art” has ceased to represent a discrete domain of aesthetically significant objects, and has become nothing more than a vivid exemplification of a phenomenon (indeed, of a phenomenality) that pervades the world of ordinary use-objects too: “Everything that is,” she adds, “must appear, and nothing can appear without a shape of its own; hence there is in fact no thing that does not in some way transcend its functional use, and its transcendence, its beauty or ugliness, is identical with appearing publicly and being seen” (172–73).21 In fact, Arendt goes one step further: she even suggests that the usefulness of an object and its appearance are not separate aspects of the object—as though an “appearance” were like a decorative façade, layered on top of but not deeply connected to an instrumental structure (183)—but inseparably related: “The standard by which a thing’s excellence is judged,” she says, “is never mere usefulness, as though an ugly table will fulfil the same function as a handsome one, but its adequacy or inadequacy to what it should look like” (173). To attend to a thing’s appearance, in other words, is
not to turn away from but to enrich the question of what it’s good for: usefulness is more than mere usefulness.22

The ramifications of these moves are profound. They anticipate the language of layering and intertwining that Arendt will subsequently employ in the chapter on “Action,” when she says, in a passage often cited by her anti-territorial readers, that “the physical, worldly in-between along with its interests is overlaid and, as it were, overgrown with an altogether different in-between,” the one generated by speech and action (Arendt 1958, 183). Indeed, with respect to the structure of The Human Condition as a written work, this section performs the intertwining it describes. I have already noted the striking change in vocabulary that takes place here, with Arendt using language to characterize work that—on a territorial reading of the book—we would expect to be confined to the chapter on action: she writes of immortality, shining, being seen, sounding, being heard, speaking, and being read. But if the language supposedly proper to action crosses the chapter boundary in one direction, the language of work likewise crosses the chapter boundary in the other direction, for the first of Arendt's two epigraphs to the chapter on action—“All sorrows can be borne if you put them into a story or tell a story about them,” from Isak Dinesen—is a recollection of the theme of the work of art with which the chapter on work had concluded (173). Shortly after The Human Condition was completed, Arendt would even give this zone of relation between work and action a name: with characteristic idiosyncracy, she would call it “culture,” using the term to refer neither to the old-fashioned anthropological idea of a coherent body of beliefs, practices, and meanings, nor to the idea of a “high” culture under threat from the rise of mass society, but simply to the activity of attending to, judging, and caring for the “things of the world” in their appearance.23

If the moves Arendt makes in the course of her treatment of the work of art help to suture work to action, they also cast a new light backward upon the “Work” chapter as a whole, and perhaps even further. Where work had originally been presented in terms of the production of physically durable artifacts—in contrast to labor’s provision of material for immediate consumption (1958, 136–37)—by the end of the chapter Arendt has supplemented physical durability with “permanence,” which is a function of the “memorability” of tangible things (170). Similarly, where work had originally been cast as a matter of form-giving mastery exercised in isolation, by the end of the chapter homo faber’s sovereignty has been qualified in at least one crucial respect: his last act, it seems, is to show his work in public—that is, to surrender it, figuratively or literally, to its users and judges (160).24 Finally, and most dramatically, the structural role of work in Arendt’s triadic scheme, and the relation that term establishes between the natural world of labor and the
fragile “in-between” of action, also seems to change, as we can see by attend-
ing to a curious detail in Arendt’s account of the relationship between art and
thought, which she calls the “immediate source” of the work of art (168).
Earlier in the chapter on “Work,” in the course of elaborating the importance
of “models” as guides to the fabrication of use objects, Arendt had contrast-
ed these models, understood as “mental images,” from certain other, more
highly subjective phenomena that could not so easily serve as the points of
departure for acts of making. “What claims our attention,” Arendt wrote
there, “is the veritable gulf that separates [these mental images] from all bod-
ily sensations, pleasure or pain, desires and satisfactions—which are so ‘pri-
ivate’ that they cannot even be adequately voiced, much less represented in
the outside world, and therefore are altogether incapable of being reified”
(141). In that highly territorial passage, which still reflects Arendt’s concern
to distinguish work, in its artificiality, from labor, with its connections to the
rhythms of nature and of the body, the gulf to which Arendt refers performs
only one function, the function of separation. In the section on the work of
art, by contrast, Arendt’s understanding of these “private” phenomena is sig-
nificantly different:
The immediate source of the art work is the human capacity for thought,
as man’s “propensity to truck and barter” is the source of exchange objects,
and as his ability to use is the source of use things. These are capacities of
man and not mere attributes of the animal like feelings, wants, and needs,
to which they are related and which often constitute their content . . . .
Thought is related to feeling and transforms its mute and inarticulate
despondency, as exchange transforms the naked greed of desire and usage
transforms the desperate longing of needs—until they are all fit to enter the
world and to be transformed into things, to become reified. In each
instance, a human capacity which by its very nature is world-open and
communicative transcends and releases into the world a passionate intensi-
ty from its imprisonment within the self. (Arendt 1958, 168)

What is most striking about this passage isn’t simply that Arendt tacitly posi-
tions use and exchange as analogous to art: we have already seen that the force
of her engagement with the idea of the work of art is not simply to elevate
a special class of aesthetic objects to preeminence, but rather to provoke a
reconsideration of her own earlier account of use objects, since that account
had turned out to neglect the dimension of appearance that she says is pres-
ent even in useful artifacts. Here, however, Arendt goes a step further, and
reassesses the natural phenomena that she had originally sought to exclude
from the very possibility of public appearance, but which, thanks to the trans-
figurative capacities of work, can now be released from their imprisonment.25
This should remind us of the second of the two lines of tension I noted ear-
lier in the book; namely, the doubling of Arendt’s account of the public and the private, in which she elaborated a non-privative sense of “private” as a location, and represented the wall around that private location as a point of connection, joining the private to the public and enabling movement from one to the other. If the joint between labor and work was originally a separating wall, and if work itself originally functioned to isolate labor from action, Arendt now seems to have cut a passage back through—though she has not torn down—the walls she erected; and the section of the chapter devoted to the work of art has become, in effect, the exterior face, visible in public, of the wall that is “work.”

5.

I began this essay with Arendt’s familiar and powerful critique of what she calls “the substitution of making for acting”—a critique that is often and understandably read in territorial terms, as an effort to secure action and politics against the imperial tendencies of *homo faber*. If the foregoing account of the architecture—or architectures—of *The Human Condition* is right, however, then it ought to be possible to understand that critique differently. Rather than see the substitution of making for acting as a territorial transgression, we might represent it instead as a kind of reduction, a collapse of the relationship of simultaneous difference and interdependence between work and action. On this reading, importantly, the substitution of making for acting would not merely threaten action: it would threaten work, too. And indeed, Arendt seems to say just this. It is important to remember that the “substitution of making for acting” that Arendt criticizes is, from her perspective, first and foremost a conceptual—indeed, philosophical—event: although she allows that “men of action no less than men of thought” have been tempted to try to escape from the “haphazardness” of the “realm of human affairs” (1958, 220), and although she will occasionally refer to the mutual “distrust” of actors and fabricators (Arendt 2006, 214–15 [217–18]), the specific agent of the substitution of making for acting that she goes on to criticize is not *homo faber*, but the philosopher. (Her characterization of this substitution, in the title of the section she devotes to it, as “traditional” [220] is an important signal of this point, for the “tradition” with which she was engaged when she first began to articulate these concerns about making and acting was “the tradition of Western political thought” that stretched from Plato to Marx.) And the philosophers who effected this conceptual substitution, as we already know, were from Arendt’s point of view no great respecters of the specificity of the constituent activities within the *vita activa*. Indeed, Arendt insists that in those dialogues in which Plato (one of her main culprits) applied the doctrine of ideas to political life, thereby modeling politics on the
experience of fabrication, he was compelled to treat “fabrication” itself reductively: there, the ideas appear as standards of goodness or fitness but not as instances of “the beautiful,” or as “what ‘shines most forth’ (ekphanestaton),” as they do in dialogues in which he was “unconcerned with political philosophy,” such as the Symposium (1958, 225). The substitution of making for acting, in other words, is problematic in part because it reduces work itself to the production of mere use objects, disarticulating use from appearance—and thus also disarticulating work from action. In short, to interpret Arendt’s critique territorially, as an effort to enforce a rigid separation between work and action, would be to confuse the traditional philosophical representation of work with the phenomenon itself; and it would thus risk the irony of delivering us—by a different route—to the very destination Arendt sought to escape.

If, instead, we understood Arendt’s critique of the substitution of making for acting in anti-reductive terms—as part of an effort to articulate the forms of interdependence that connect work and action—we would be in a better position to answer long-standing concerns about the supposed emptiness of Arendt’s conception of action. As I indicated earlier, this problem can be addressed, up to a point, by insisting that action can exist for its own sake and also have an extrinsic, instrumental purpose, as many of Arendt’s anti-territorial readers have suggested. But to put the point this way does not capture the depth of Arendt’s insight, because it leaves these two dimensions of human activity unrelated: peacefully coexisting, but indifferent to each other, as it were. Arendt is saying something stronger than this: that the instrumental purpose of a course of activity—its use, you might say—is, when properly understood, never merely instrumental, but implicates larger questions about, as Arendt would later say, “how [the world] is to look” and “what kind of things are to appear in it” (Arendt 2006, 220 [223]). Action emerges when we confront and are provoked into speech and deed by these larger questions as they present themselves in some “worldly, objective reality” (1958, 182).

Or consider another line of argument that some of Arendt’s interpreters have followed in an attempt to bring action out of its austere isolation: in Arendt’s view, they observe, the practice of political action depends on “work” in the sense that action, in its fragility and ephemerality, requires a “durable institutional home”—a “wall-like law,” as Arendt says at one point (64)—to create a stable setting within which a public sphere can thrive (Villa 2007, 39, emphasis omitted; see also Waldron 2000; Keenan 2003, chap. 2). This point, too, goes some distance toward dispelling the image of Arendt as concerned only with the fleeting and intangible performances that take place in public, but it also underestimates the range of worldly artifacts that are relevant to action, and misunderstands the nature of their relevance, by focusing narrowly on their function of guaranteeing stability. The relation of work to
action is not just the paradoxical relation of a solid foundation to a freedom that it simultaneously enables and risks smothering. It is also a relation of provocation and response between things in their meaningful appearances—not just walls or laws but artifacts of all sorts—and what we say about and do to them and the world they constitute.29

Having suggested that Arendt’s critique of the substitution of making for acting should be understood not only as a defense of action but also as a defense of work against its reductive misconception, I want, finally, to return to the question of Arendt’s own work—The Human Condition—and my own use throughout this essay of the freighted term “architecture” in its interpretation. Taken literally, an architect is a “master builder,” not only in the sense of being highly accomplished, but also in the sense of being the master of builders, one who issues them commands, but who does not himself participate in the activity of building. Indeed, Plato drew on the example of the architect to make a similar point about the “statesman,” who does not carry out the various tasks of the city himself, but rules those who do perform them, determining when and where these tasks should be carried out (Statesman 259e8–9; 306c10–d4 [1999])—but of course Plato’s Statesman was one of Arendt’s crucial foils in her critique of the traditional, hierarchical understanding of rule, in which action is split apart into command and execution (1958, 222–23). One thing we learn from the dynamics of Arendt’s book is that it is not just action but also work, including theoretical work, that would be disfigured if it were seen merely as the rote execution of a plan given in advance. Arendt’s book is not disfigured in this way because its architecture, unlike the philosophical fantasy of architecture, is not pure in this way. Arendt shows herself to be willing to complicate her own earlier formulations; to let herself be driven to join work to action and to articulate their interdependence rather than simply to separate activities from each other, and to dictate when and where they should be carried out. She makes her architecture subordinate to her craft, rather than the other way around; and she thereby lets her own thinking and writing display a measure of the unpredictability and non-sovereignty that she describes most vividly in the chapter of The Human Condition on action. And it was, I think, no failure for her to have left her tracks visible in this way—to have shown her work, you might say. For in the end, the territorial and anti-reductive architectures of The Human Condition respond to two different intuitions about what threatens political freedom in modernity: one focuses on the destruction of socially and institutionally differentiated spaces in which people can exercise, and experience the meaning of, public freedom; the other is concerned with the prospect that, in struggling to preserve such differentiated spaces, we may insulate them so tightly from their social settings that they become vacuous-
ly self-referential, and thus politically impotent. The really sobering thought provoked by *The Human Condition* is that both of these dangers are real; and what is most valuable about the book is that, precisely in its twists and turns, it discloses this paradoxical problem, letting it shine forth in all its complexity: that is what has made it a durable work of political thought.

Notes

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1 I owe this epigraph to its citation by Kenneth Frampton (2002, 101).

2 “Attitudes” is Pitkin’s term (1981, 342); elsewhere, she replaces this term with “mentalistés,” and also notes some important limits of this way of approaching Arendt’s categories (Pitkin 1998, 179–80). “Ideal types” is Benhabib’s term (2000, 131); “abstractions from the welter of worldly activity,” Roy Tsao’s (2002, 101). I have made a version of this move elsewhere (Markell 2006, 6).

3 Two subtle features of Arendt’s own way of writing about her concepts seem to signal the difference between these two architectures. When Arendt refers to the way that the tradition of political theory has blurred the differences among labor, work, and action—which she does three times (1958, 15, 17, 316)—she always refers to the “distinctions and articulations” (my emphasis) within the *vita activa*, thereby signaling that her concepts are not merely divided from one another but also joined to each other in specific ways. Moreover, although Arendt refers repeatedly in *The Human Condition* to the “distinction between labor and work,” she never refers to a comparable “distinction between work and action.” The fact that such a distinction doesn’t show up as an explicit discursive or conceptual object for her doesn’t mean, of course, that no such distinction is implied in her work—but it does suggest that the pairing of work and action isn’t important for her as a distinction in the same way that the pairing of labor and work is; instead, as I shall argue, the pairing of work and action brings the problem of *articulation*, not separation, into the foreground.

4 As is now well known, after the publication of *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (Arendt 1951) Arendt began a working on a project called “Totalitarian Elements in Marxism,” which was subsequently recast as “Karl Marx and the Tradition of Western Political Thought,” but never published in that form. Much of Arendt’s research and writing during this period, however, contributed directly to *The Human Condition*, which represented, in my view, not so much a different project as a dramatic reconceptualization of the same project Arendt had been pursuing since the beginning of
the 1950s. On this period in Arendt’s work see Canovan (1992), Kohn (2002), Kohn (2007), and Kohn (2005), as well as recently published excerpts from Arendt’s manuscripts devoted to the Marx project (Arendt 2002b; Arendt 2005; Arendt 2007a; Arendt 2007b). The most extensive study of the Marx project is Weisman (2007).

This binary scheme should remind contemporary readers of the basic distinction between *bios* and *zôe* the reproduction and enforcement of which, Giorgio Agamben has proposed, has been the function of sovereign power in the tradition of Western political thought (Agamben 1998, 1–4, 181); in proposing, however, that “work” exceeds its initial determination as sovereign fabrication, this essay will also point to ways in which *The Human Condition* breaks quite radically with the terms of Agamben’s analysis, and does not merely call for the “restoration” of the distinction between *zôe* and *bios*, as Agamben suggests (1998, 187).

Jacques Taminiaux has suggested that *Origins* already contains “in a nutshell”—though not in so many words—the articulation of the active life into labor, work, and action (Taminiaux 2002, 437). Taminiaux is right that an attentive reader of *Origins*, today, is likely to notice themes that anticipate each of the three central terms of Arendt’s later book; but he is, in my view, wrong to treat the transition from *Origins* to *The Human Condition* simply as a process of making explicit what was at first only “elliptically” stated, for these themes don’t relate to each other in the same ways, or perform the same theoretical functions, in the two texts: Arendt’s post- *Origins* adoption of the distinction between labor and work is thus precisely the sort of new departure that can be obscured by the benefits of hindsight. Roy Tsao, by contrast, has rightly insisted on the absence of Arendt’s “trademark triadic scheme” from *Origins* (Tsao 2007, 11). Nevertheless, Tsao demonstrates this claim by focusing on what he calls Arendt’s “assimilation of action to fabrication” in *Origins* a strategy that seems to me both to underemphasize the importance of the distinction between labor and work (not, in the first instance, between work and action) in the development of Arendt’s triadic scheme, and to overemphasize the opposition between work and action in *The Human Condition* itself.

Indeed, Arendt’s implication that one and the same artificing, “civilizing” impulse can enable both politics and the anti-political barbarism of total domination brings *Origins* closer in feel, at certain moments, than any of her other works to the sweeping indictments of Western rationalism to be found in texts like *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002). See for example Arendt (1951, 296); and on such passages, see Tsao (2007, 12–16).

In Arendt’s late 1951 proposal for a Guggenheim fellowship in support of her research on Marx, for instance, she still referred unproblematically to “Marx’s concept of man as a ‘working animal’” rather than, as she would later say, *animal laborans* (“John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation, 1952–1975, n.d.,” Hannah Arendt Papers); likewise, in an extended discussion of the issue of sovereignty and action in her notebooks dated May 1951, Arendt treated the categories of “Herstellender” (maker) and “Arbeiter” (laborer) as interchangeable, and wrote about the dangers of applying the category of “herstellend[e] Arbeit” (fabricating labor) to politics (Arendt 2002a, 80). When Arendt applied for a renewal of her Guggenheim fellowship in January of 1953, however, she reported that during the previous year
she had “read for six weeks in the especially rich French collections at Paris on the
history of labor and the history of socialism. Here I concentrated on the theory of
labor, philosophically considered, as distinguished from work. By this I mean the dis-
tinction between man as homo faber and man as an animal laborans; between man as a
craftsman and artist (in the Greek sense) and man as submitted to the curse of earn-
ing his ‘daily bread in the sweat of his brow’” (Hannah Arendt to Henry Allen Moe,
n.d.,” Hannah Arendt Papers). The earliest appearances of the distinction in Arendt’s
notebooks actually slightly precede her European trip, as well as her Guggenheim: it
turns up in her notes on Weber’s Wirtschaftsgeschichte from February 1952, and again
the same month in a comment on Marx’s understanding of power (Arendt 2002a,
183, 188).

9 For extended treatments of the relative coherence or incoherence of the var-
ious ways in which Arendt uses the term “social,” see Benhabib (2000, 22–30,

10 The following point builds on an observation made by Tsao (2002, 116–117).

11 This is suggested by her implicit alignment of Aristotle with “the Greek
understanding of polis life” at 13 and 23, as well as by her claim that, in defining man
as a zôon politikon, Aristotle “only formulated the current opinion of the polis about
man and the political way of life” (Arendt 1958, 27); for a similar passage that stress-
es Aristotle’s tendency to express the unarticulated views of “other Greeks” rather
than to state his own “personal opinion,” see Arendt (2005, 116).

12 This parallel between the tendency of philosophers to ignore the distinctions
among the activities of the vita activa, on the one hand, and the tendency of actors
to ignore the distinction between labor and work, on the other, suggests that Arendt’s
understanding of the relation of politics to philosophy is more complex than is
sometimes appreciated. A similarly complex account can be found in her recently
published “Introduction into Politics,” where she comments that Plato’s founding of
the Academy “stood in opposition to the polis because it set the Academy apart from
the political arena, but at the same time it was also done in the spirit of this specifi-
cally Greco-Athenian political space—that is, insofar as its substance lay in men
speaking with one another.” She goes on to add that the participants in the Academy
“had to be freed from politics in the Greek sense in order to be free for the space
of academic freedom, just as the citizen had to be freed from earning the necessities of
life in order to be free for politics” (Arendt 2005, 131).

13 For a stronger version of this conclusion, see Tsao (2002). Tsao makes a bril-
liant case that many of Arendt’s Greek examples are meant to contrast, pointedly, with
aspects of her own phenomenology of action, including especially her invocation of
Achilles’ vain attempt to be master of his own story, and her citation of Pericles’ claim
that action can be self-preserving, indifferent to the reifying efforts of the poets (Tsao
2002, 110–115). Nevertheless, I don’t think the right lesson to draw from this is that
Arendt is straightforwardly “against Athens” and its understanding of action, as Tsao
puts it, because as I read sections 27 and 28 of the “Action” chapter, the solution that
Tsao casts as Arendt’s alternative to the Periclean strategy also has an Athenian pedi-
gree. I would suggest instead that Arendt must be read as neither for nor against
“Athens,” strictly speaking; it is as though the Greeks, with their “faith in dynamis” (1958, 205) and their understanding of action as energeia (206–07), had been onto something valid and vital about action, and that, at the same time, the extremity and exclusiveness of their pursuit eventually contributed to the loss of the thing they were after. Perhaps the “sad wisdom of hindsight” with which Arendt says we now read Pericles (205) is meant to be “tragic,” and not only “ironic” (Tsao 2002, 115).

Arendt does go on to say that the “law of the polis,” which she figures as a kind of city wall, “retained the original spatial significance” of these household boundaries even as it took on a new shape (1958, 63). But the differences between these walls are at least as important as their similarities: in the case of the city wall, the polis is figured as a homogeneous territory to be defended against forces of destruction that besiege it from the outside; whereas in the case of the household walls, the polis is figured as at once separated from and built up out of private spaces that are nested within it. This difference may help to account for Arendt’s later critique of the Periclean strategy of “organized remembrance,” which tries to remedy the fragility of action by enclosing and stabilizing the city with literal and legal walls (197–98 and see Tsao 2002): in the latter case, walls are valuable only insofar as they serve to separate, and lose their simultaneous significance as devices that separate and relate or connect. On laws as walls, see also n. 30 below and accompanying text.

In the fourth section of the chapter—that is, at the beginning of her second iteration of public-private distinction—Arendt had already introduced the idea of the public world as something that “relates and separates men at the same time” (1958, 52).

Beginning with the fourth printing of The Human Condition in 1965, this became note 63; the change occurred when Arendt deleted what had originally been note 40 on p. 48 and the corresponding text (a brief quotation from Pindar).

Neither Arendt’s reading of the phenomenological significance of the ban on party walls nor Fustel de Coulanges’s account of their religious meaning excludes the likelihood that such restrictions were also, as Josephine Crawley has suggested to me, meant to prevent the spread of fires. See for example the discussion of the Roman ambitus in Robinson (1992, 33–38).

One of the few readers of Arendt to remark on the division of her idea of “work” between the production of use objects and the production of works of art is the architectural critic and theorist Kenneth Frampton, who refers to this as the “essential duality of the homo faber” and notes that this duality parallels the uneasy suspension of architecture between building and art (Frampton 2002, 30–31). For another Arendtian exploration of related issues in modern architectural theory and practice, see Baird (1995).

The tendency of use-objects to appear as mere “tools” from the point of view of animal laborans is the subject of section 20 (1958, 144–53); see also 306–309.

Note that the citation in the early printings of The Human Condition gives the incorrect page number in the Cassirer edition of Kant (it is 515, not 448–49).

If Arendt’s general concern with the world-disclosive aspects of the work of art shows an obvious debt to Heidegger, this turn away from the notion of the work of art as somehow extraordinary in its disclosive capacities seems to me to mark a
Benjaminian counterpoint in Arendt’s thought. In future work I shall explore the relation of this part of *The Human Condition* to Heidegger’s and Benjamin’s essays on the “work of art” from the 1930s (Heidegger 2002; Benjamin 2003); for some discussion see Flynn (1991).

22 For an analogous account of how questions of usefulness, which appear at first to be merely instrumental, open out into fundamentally political terrain, see the rich account of “use” in Aristotle in Frank (2005, chaps. 2–3).

23 “Culture” in this sense, Arendt says, “indicates that art and politics, their conflicts and tensions notwithstanding, are interrelated and even mutually dependent” (Arendt 2006, 222, 215; in older Penguin editions the correct pages are 225, 218; these will be included in square brackets following the 2006 page numbers in subsequent citations of this work).

24 At least by the time of her 1970 lectures on Kant’s third *Critique*, Arendt also seems to have concluded that the isolation of the “maker” must be limited even in the course of the production of an object, and not only after its completion; thus, she insists that the “maker” must be understood as sharing a “judging” faculty with the spectator—indeed, that the “critic and spectator sits in every actor and fabricator” (Arendt 1982, 63).

25 For a concrete example of the role of work—in this case of poetry—in effecting this kind of transfiguration, see Arendt’s admiring comments about Brecht’s poetic response to poverty and oppression (and about the poor and oppressed’s efforts to “create their own poetic immortality”) in Arendt (1968, 237–39).

26 Another non-territorial relation of labor to work and action comes into view, if only very briefly, in the chapter on “labor” itself, in a curious digression in which Arendt suddenly and surprisingly talks about what she calls the “second task of laboring”—not the task of satisfying the necessities of life, but the “constant, unending fight against the processes of growth and decay through which nature forever invades the human artifice” (1958, 100; my emphasis). “The protection and preservation of the world against natural processes,” she goes on, “are among the toils which need the monotonous performance of daily repeated chores” (100). It is worth noting the similarity between this conception of a repetitive, cyclical chore that nevertheless helps to protect and preserve the world and Arendt’s later account of “culture,” whose etymological connections to agriculture, with its cyclical rhythms, she highlights (Arendt 2006, 208–10 [211–13]; for her more territorial take on agriculture, focused on distinguishing “cultivated land” from the artifacts produced by work, see *The Human Condition* [1958, 138–39]); there may, in short, be a kind of culture practiced at the joint between labor and work too. For a suggestive meditation on the relation of gardens and gardening to Arendt’s categories, see Harrison (2008, especially chaps. 1–2, 4).

27 See n. 5 above.

28 Arendt should not, of course, be taken as an authoritative reader of Plato: for a compelling and very different perspective on Plato’s political dialogues, see Jill Frank’s ongoing work on Plato, for example Frank (2009).

29 As Garrath Williams has pointed out to me, the other problem with seeing the dependence of action on work in terms of the need for sheer stability—particularly if one focuses on “laws” as exemplary artifacts—is that this view risks ascrib-
ing to Arendt a specifically Greek understanding of law that she discusses but does not obviously endorse. Indeed, at a couple of key points in *The Human Condition* she appears to distance herself from the Greek view of law and legislation as the pre-political condition of political life, and to align herself instead with a Roman view of law (inherited by Montesquieu) that sees laws as relations between people or nations (1958, 63–64, 190–91, 194–95). A fuller picture of Arendt’s thinking about law, which confirms this preference for the Roman conception, can now be found in Arendt (2007a); on the significance of Rome for Arendt, and especially for our understanding of the relation between work and action, see Hammer (2008, 72–73). In my view, it is precisely by enriching our understanding of what Arendt means by “work”—taking into account the significance of the fact that fabricated objects are not merely bluntly durable, but that they appear—that we can begin to make sense of how law could be understood in the Roman sense as an artifact that does not merely set boundaries but also establishes relations.

**Works Cited**


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