Identity and Authoritarianism

The Boundaries of a Boundless Selfhood

Steven Orr

Many of us, working as scholars and scientists, interrupt our stories so that they don't incarcerate us. Call it what you will — the deconstruction of our narratives or the untelling of our tales or the standing apart from the fray—it helps us maintain our sense of what we are doing and why; of the difference between the yard and the tower, and their ultimate indistinguishability; and of the need to acknowledge both the arbitrariness of all categories and their naturalness.

J. Edward Chamberlin
If This Is Your Land, Where Are Your Stories?, 2004

And so I write neither as identity's friend nor as its foe. Either posture is likely to call to mind that full-hearted avowal, by the American transcendentalist Margaret Fuller, "I accept the universe!"—and Carlyle's storied rejoinder, "Gad! She'd better!" As with gravity, you might as well be on good terms with it, but there's no point in buttering it up.

Kwame Anthony Appiah
The Ethics of Identity, 2005

I chose, and my world was shaken—so what? / The choice may have been mistaken / but choosing was not.

Stephen Sondheim
Sunday in the Park with George, 1984

The contemporary subject is a being implicated in a variety of overlapping and contradictory identities that all fail to adequately represent the character of the individual subject because of the unnavigable distance between the distinct individual and the ideal that is imposed upon them, yet these approximations are not entirely false either. Identity claims represent a desire to remain intact, to stay whole and formed, but have left us without the possibility for a plurality of *selves*. It is necessarily the case that an identity categorization will not fully speak to the subject of focus: this can most obviously be understood with personality traits such as kind or relaxed that are, at best, approximations of a particular moment, but insufficiently general to possibly describe the whole sum of a being. A variety of contemporary theorists and philosophers have explored the notion of boundlessness—Arthur Kroker uses the term “body drift” to describe the way that we transition “through many different specular performances of the body”; Patricia Hill Collins uses intersectionality to describe the theory that "oppression cannot be reduced to one fundamental type, and that oppressions work together in producing injustice”; and Wendy Brown explores the paradoxical nature of identity wherein “the first imaginings of freedom are always constrained by and potentially even require the very structure of oppression that freedom emerges to oppose”—and each advocates for understanding the ambiguous boundaries of identity so as to better explain the unique and distinct nature of individual subjects (Kroker 1; Collins 18; Brown 7). These thinkers showcase the conflict between authoritarian and normative regimes of identity that we accept and the possibility for plurality that all subjects are capable of.

One cannot make a totality out of an infinity, and the task of defining identity is always an attempt to make rigid the boundless possibilities that lay before human beings. Categorization is invariably an exclusionary process wherein we establish what we are by establishing what we

are not. These boundaries are convenient acts of generalization that allow for comparisons between an absolute form and a specific subject. This relational understanding of the self transforms all subjects into deviations from established forms—or the norm—of these concepts. Such understandings of the self entrench a sense of inferiority in contrast to an unattainable ideal, distancing our selves from and removing identity ambiguities. These identity constructions are always projects of self-harm, where we seek to become the category in which we are placed (or place our selves in) at the expense of that which we are. Human beings are complex, messy, and drifting; tidiness is not within our nature. When we attempt such cleanliness it is a method of willing our *selves* out of existence; rather than existing within the contradictions of our identity we accept the imposition of others. This conception of selfhood is more akin to the tenets of totalitarianism than the liberal subject; it is closer to an authoritarian regime of identity than the principles of civil rights and the freedoms of speech, expression, and belief. In *The Origins of Totalitarianism,* political philosopher Hannah Arendt traces the way that "heterogeneous uniformity is one of the primary conditions for totalitarianism" (Arendt, *Origins* 332). When we insist upon rigid identity boundaries we demonstrate that we would rather be dominated than self-determining, that despite the Western insistence on democratic states we are rooted in a totalitarian conception of selfhood.[1] We would rather be simple than ourselves.

The use of labels and categories is linguistically necessary. Whenever we attempt to explain a concept, relate an experience, or interact verbally, we make use of words and tones that are representations of our personal connections to the world. It may be possible to exist without

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[1] Citizenship is example of an identity construction that attempts to bound individual subjects within a certain understanding of their self, but becomes vague and abstract when it is utilized outside of the fiction of legal frameworks. This is not to say that the concept of citizenship has no bearing in reality, nor is it to say that the notion is without its use; it is simply the case that national narratives that declare *who* an individual is almost always require a degree of backing from those involved, either as a self-description or an impositions from others.

employing language and metaphor, but such a life is not desirable as it would necessarily be isolated from others. Human beings interact with each other in such a way that allows the achievement of more than is possible in a solitary, apolitical existence, and it is by virtue of communication that such interactions occur. This is not to make the obtuse claim that communication or language requires an individual to speak. Arendt frequently pairs speech with action because she acknowledges that it is most certainly possible to be political and be with others without the use of oral or written language. Although it may be difficult to determine what exactly is created, the ancient Greek figures of Achilles and Icarus are certainly engaged in bringing *something* new to the world; likewise with the Tunisian street vendor that protested through self-immolation. Despite the silence from the individual subject, their politics become possible to be understood through the reification of their narratives by poets and storytellers. There is a way in which the failed flight of Icarus and the martyrdom of the Tunisian vendor can speak without speech, but temporal and spatial limitations insist that there is still a manner in which language is inescapable.[2] This is a presupposition of all social contracts that establish societies and polities on the assumption that to do so is a superior alternative to the world that existed prior to them. Thus, while we may admit that communication is not necessary or *true*, it is useful as it permits us politics. The problem is that our deployment of language does not match our contemporary understanding of politics nor is it appropriate in a society wherein technologies and conceptions of the human being have challenged identity boundaries. There is a difficult conflict that arises

[2] While this has been the case historically, technologies that overcome the biases of the moment have radically altered the oral nature of such storytelling. Even the written word still makes a direct appeal to language to bring a subject into a situation wherein they were not. It is technologies that allow one to actually view into other moments that has removed the social element and replaced it with the illusion of objectivity. The telling of stories is always from the point of view of the narrator, even when that narrator is telling another's story. This is likewise the case with viewed stories, but it is more difficult to acknowledge that the position of the viewer is not your own.

between what appears to be the construction of totalitarian identities within polities of liberalism and democracy.

The mapping of totalitarianism onto the material and psychic bodies of individual human beings is not simply the reversal of Hobbes' declaration that the state is an "Artificiall Man ... of greater stature and strength than the Naturall"—although it is certainly the case that the state is often personified and comprehended in terms of bodily metaphors (Hobbes 9). Instead discussing bodies in this manner is meant to open up understandings of subjecthood to include a variety of traditionally excluded and misunderstood selves. Groups and collectives can certainly be seen as engaging in a form of laboring that is not necessarily biological, but is certainly occupied with the continuance of the form of the group itself; likewise, while it can be debated whether animals are capable of engaging in the processes of work and action, it cannot be denied that the possibility to turn away from self-sustenance is a capacity of these non-human actors.[3] The language of subject and object is meant to escape simple categorizations that can easily describe the world, but, as with Judith Butler, "my narrative falters, as it must" (Butler, *Precarious Life* 23). This grammatical binary fails to convey both the process-driven nature of subjecthood and the manner by which the boundaries between the divisions collapse into each other when their tidiness is replaced with complex beings that are implicated as both subjects and objects. The laboring subject and the dominated object are not mean to be stable and fixed bodies, but modes of being that

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[3] While there are clear linkages between the works of Hannah Arendt and Friedrich Nietzsche, this point is not one of them. Nietzsche writes in *The Antichrist* that "[humans] are in no way the crown of creation, all beings occupy the same level of perfection" (Nietzsche *The Portable Nietzsche* 580). As with all Nietzschean aphorisms, it should not be taken as an absolute point, but rather as an attempt to draw out something more nuanced. It is not necessarily the case that he would advocate for an animal ethics, but instead he questions the automatic placement of human beings as the height of existence—although it should be noted that Nietzsche goes on to say that "[humans are] of course the most *interesting* [of animals]", returning to an anthropocentric stance (580). Arendt takes as granted the superiority of human beings when she writes about the human condition, while Nietzsche seems to want to, at the very least, problematize such a situating.

loop back upon and contradict themselves. This exploration of totalitarianism is not merely the improbable application of a theory of statehood to individual subjectivity, instead it is the exploration of an understanding of one set of subjects to make sense of another. Although it is certainly the case that the state and the individual differ, when understood through the politics of Hannah Arendt's *vita activa* it is a only a difference of scope and not essence.

In *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Arendt suggests that it is possible to comprehend the multitude of outrageous and so-called "unprecedented" phenomena that make up human existence—not by use of the reductionist methods of science, analogy, or causality, but with an "unpremeditated, attentive facing up to ... reality" (Arendt, *Origins* xiv). The world contains nothing transcendent beyond explanation—but human beings are creative and can produce entirely new situations that cannot be understood with the use of old models. It is not possible to judge the unique by the traditional; the complexities of human affairs demand careful examinations of history, a respect for the multitude of particular influences, and the willingness to eschew long-established understandings in favor of creating new modes of thinking. Arendt stresses the importance of idle speculations on the possible futures that could have been, because they remind us that "history is a story of events and not of forces or ideas with predictable courses" (Arendt, *Human Condition* 252). Yet we are unable to escape the psychic markings that such musings leave behind and these potentialities are dangerous because they lack the "tangible unexpectedness of the event" (Arendt, *Human Condition* 252). The present reality is never simply a mirror to past events, and as long as there are human beings involved, each experience will be new.

This is the manner in which Arendt attempted to make sense of the trial of Nazi war criminal Adolf Eichmann, and the linkages between totalitarianism and bureaucracy—as a series

of radical phenomena the likes of which had not been seen before and, therefore, could not be judged according to existing standards. Her critique of the Eichmann trial is that it failed to consider the absolute newness of his crimes, "which [were] of a different nature from all the atrocities of the past" (Arendt, *Eichmann* 267). It is a mistake to see genocide as an extension of either murder or anti-Semitism, as both fail to implicate the manner by which human beings are transformed into objects. While the court was easily able to explain *what* had happened, there was no attempt to engage in "the task of understanding the criminal whom they had come to judge" which Arendt believes to be a necessary component of justice (Arendt, *Eichmann* 276). It is not simply a matter of punishing the wrongdoer, but of attempting to repair the *polis* that has been changed by virtue of the crime. While it can never return to its state prior to the commission of the crime, it is possible to recognize the conditions that made such atrocities possible.

Arendt's politics are fundamentally rooted in the development of new worlds which can only be done by cultivating our uniquely humans qualities and "what [humans] share with all other forms of animal life [is] not considered to be human" (Arendt, *Human Condition* 84). It is the animal that is concerned solely with reproduction, consumption, and the biological necessities of existence, and though the human being is capable of standing at the apex of the kingdom Animalia such an existence is a denial of our creative capacities. The ability to establish a world that is otherwise has nothing to do with property, the production of goods, or ownership—such concepts are attempts to imbue a form of permanence upon the world, but "the durability of the human artifice is not absolute" and all fabrications will eventually perish (Arendt, *Human Condition* 136). Reproduction of the self is the realm of labor, and production of the world through the use of those bodies is the domain of work:

> The work of our hands, as distinguished from the labor of our bodies—*homo faber* who makes and literally 'works upon' as distinguished from the *animal laborans* which labors and 'mixes with'—fabricates the sheer unending variety of things whose sum total constitutes the human artifice (Arendt, *Human Condition* 136)

But while the human subject may depend on both labor and work, neither constitutes the political sphere nor can one take up the affairs of the mind when they are concerned with such processes. It is the mind that distinguishes humans from animals, and it is likewise the ability to think that grants each individual human the possibility for uniqueness. The expression of this uniqueness cannot possible occur in isolation because of its revelatory quality.[4] So while Arendt articulates distinctiveness as a possibility for each particular human being, it can only be made manifest when we speak and act in concert with each other. This *can* occur whenever people are gathered together, but proximity alone does not necessarily reveal the unexpected within human beings; if the possibility were a probability or a certainty, it could be expected, predicted, and counted upon. It is these acts of haphazard randomness that elevate the human being above animals.[5] This chaotic nature of human action requires courage because even the actor does not know what will be revealed about their being and the world that they are creating.

Seen thus, and acknowledging the time in which Arendt is writing, it becomes easier to explain her conception of the human being—paradoxically as both a plurality of distinct traits that can lead to unthought possibilities and a collection of indisputable facts that would be, in her own words, "kind of insane" to imagine otherwise—and its unmatched status as a thinking and

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[4] Arendt makes explicitly clear that to *be* unique and to *express* that uniqueness are related, but separate: "Through [speech and action] men distinguish themselves instead of merely being distinct; they are the modes in which human beings appear to each other, not indeed as physical objects, but as *qua* men" (Arendt *Human Condition* 176).

[5] The creative power of human beings mirrors that of the God of Genesis: "In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters" (*The New Oxford Annotated*, Gen. 1.1-2). It is in this sense that Arendt utilizes "create", as a method of establishing a form despite (and through) chaos. This ability to speak and reform the world is the freedom that is bestowed upon all human beings by virtue of their mortality.

acting subject (qtd. in Kristeva 2001b 69). She fled Germany prior to World War II and her worn is aimed towards that which Neal Stephenson calls, "the highest and best purpose to which we could dedicate our lives": the safeguarding against and prevention of another Holocaust which, as with all revealed things, will "[stay] with mankind as a potentiality long after its actuality has become a thing of the past" (Stephenson 497; Arendt, *Eichmann* 273). If *The Human Condition* comes across as a celebration of strictly bounded understandings of the human subject, that is because Arendt is attempting to make sense of how Germany could have committed so heinous a crime against humanity as the Holocaust. She utilizes a bounded human subject because she strives to affirm the value of all humans in such a way that makes it preposterous to be as thoughtless as Eichmann, the bureaucratic architect of the Jewish genocide who would make the claim that "[he was] not the monster [he was] made out to be" (qtd. in Arendt, *Eichmann* 248). While it may not be the case that the possibility for such crimes can ever be completely eliminated from the scope of human affairs, Arendt means to ensure that no act can ever be claimed transcendent and beyond the realm of human understanding, justice, and judgment.[6] We must, following Arendt, respect the humanity of other human beings.

Acknowledging the context of Arendt's work provides an explanation for the choices that she made and helps to clear the difficulties that her philosophy faces in the wake of technological and sociological changes that she could not have predicted. While her criticisms of bureaucracy are just as apt in contemporary society, there is also the inescapable conclusion that she privi-

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[6] In "Situating Hannah Arendt on Action and Politics," Jeffrey Isaac addresses a similar point in his plea for understanding the context of Arendt's work: "[I do not] believe that we ought to abandon creative interpretations of figures like Plato or Nietzsche or comparisons between such figures. But such interpretations should always be undertaken with historical sensitivity. In the case of Arendt, it is impossible to understand her work, much less to understand its relevance to contemporary concerns, without situating it historically, for her model of action was, above all, an effort to understand how the dreams of modern ideologues had produced monstrous nightmares and how it might be possible to reconstitute human dignity and freedom in a world laid waste by such nightmares." (Isaac 539)

leges the human subject as she understood it to be in the post-WWII period. This is most obvious in *The Human Condition* wherein she solidifies her distinctions between *animal laborans*, *homo faber*, and *vita activa*: it may be the case that human beings have biological needs as is the case with animals and it may also be the case that human beings can engage in establishing permanence through fabrication, but that which is solely *animal laborans* or *homo faber* is incapable of political action. While these categories can be broadened to speak to processes instead of subjects (as she does with labor, work, and action respectively), Arendt is clear that natality—that is to say, the speech and action that is creative and brings about a new world—is uniquely the *human* condition.

As useful as it may be to classify beings in this regard, the manner in which Arendt does so is absolute and totalizing. Furthermore, when she is read against the backdrop of feminism, gender studies, and critical race theory, the divisions that she makes between public and private seem fundamentally contrary to the rallying cry that "the personal is political"; likewise she shows a distinct lack of concern in her work for the topics of gender and sexuality, and her accounts of race relations, in *On Violence, The Origins of Totalitarianism*, and "Reflections on Little Rock", are still troubling for Arendtian theorists today.[7][8] If these concerns are indicative of a trend in Arendt's thought, it would seem that she does not support resistance against a dominating power in situations where there is still the possibility for action and politics. This would seem to explain the contradiction that arises when she criticizes the Civil Rights movement for acting

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[7] With regards to feminism, Arendt herself "did not believe it was wise to support the 'cause' of women" and she dismissed it outright as "merely another (mass) movement or ideology. She believed strongly that feminism's concerns with gender identity, sexuality, and the body were politically inappropriate" (Kristeva 2001a 25; Honig 1).

[8] In "Hannah Arendt, Liberalism, and Racism: Controversies Concerning Violence, Segregation, and Education" Kathryn T. Gines does an excellent job of showing the ways that Arendt is unable to overcome her own biases with regards to African Americans and that this is not limited to the commonly labelled "aberration" that is her writings on Little Rock.

in the same manner that she criticized the *Judenräte* for not acting: Arendt would argue that the former occurred within a functioning *polis* and the latter were entirely totalitarian subjects. Yet this distinction is obviously problematic for marginalized groups and peoples who may exist within a democratic *state*, but are not democratic *subjects* because they are incapable of using speech and action in the public realm. It would seem that this is a form of totalitarianism that occurs without a totalitarian state; it is an authoritarian identity regime that may not be as obvious a tool of domination as colonization or internment, but is certainly an attempt at rejecting the distinct character of the affected peoples.

While it may be the case that Arendt's understanding of politics cannot provide a wholesome account of the contemporary political subject, her explanation of totalitarianism and her processes of labor, work, and action both provide insight into the way that we, in the words of Judith Butler, are "undone by each other" (Butler, *Precarious Life* 23). Furthermore, one can utilize and hone Arendt's theory to show that even the possibility for boundlessness manifests the power relations necessary to establish totalizing narratives—and why we, as individuals and groups, accept such identity impositions. While it is not the case that Arendt must *necessarily* be rearticulated, if one wishes to salvage her in such a way that includes those bodies that she has excluded while still remaining faithful to the core of her philosophy, it is the case that one must be willing to grant a more fluid and ambiguous understanding of the body—which will allow for the possibility of post- and non-human subjects. In attempting to place Arendt's thought within contemporary society, one must take seriously her terms and attempt to occupy the position from which she was originally writing. This is not to say that critique is impossible but that it requires, following Richard Hays, a hermeneutic of trust wherein one attempts to simultaneously occupy

the position from which she was originally writing, yet with knowledge that she either did not or could not have had. The works of Arendt are then, following Julia Kristeva, "less a body of work than an action" that one acts in concern with in an attempt to create something new (Kristeva 2001a 27). This is not to say that Arendt was wrong or that this is a correction of her thought, instead this essay is an attempt to speak with the dead and create something new.

It is in this spirit that I begin this undertaking, as I must, with these bounded bodies of sinew and flesh that we are born into. Individual beings are engaged in the laborious processes of living and are guided by those those necessities of life that are, as of yet, inescapable. The demands of the flesh come first—even as the act of giving birth itself becomes more mediated through technology, even as we are born into this world as post-human cyborgs wherein "boundaries between problematic selves and unexpected others" have been breached, and even as Romans 8:4 requires that we walk according to the Spirit (Haraway 70). We must eat before we can act; we must breathe before we can speak; and we must be alive before we can live. The alleviation that technologies provide us in maintaining our lives does not permit a complete escape from these laboring processes just as the keeping of slaves did not free the Greeks from the necessities of food and water. We escape object-hood not by animality or naturality, but by virtue of our capacity to sustain ourselves. If we were but rocks or molecules or chairs, mere objects in the world, we would not need to maintain our bodies. A chair is sustained by physics which does not make demands upon it that are possible to deny but instead exerts an absolute and totalizing domination. It is permitted no initiative of its own and is entirely predictable. It is simply a chair, nothing more, and it has no potentiality to be anything else.

It is this possibility for difference, to be otherwise, that separates subjects and objects. While objects must *be*, subjects can choose not to be. This is the capacity of subjects to not be bound by that which *is*. This potential to be unbound, whether developed or not, is the construction of an identity—regardless of the outcome or whether one desired to choose at all, it is the act of choosing that indicates a performance, because it could have been otherwise. Amidst these possibilities is the opportunity to showcase one's distinct uniqueness, that which separates an individual from the herd. This greatness transcends the multitude of qualities that one shares with others, but when it is revealed it loses its uniqueness and becomes a possibility for others.[9]

Labor is any process that a subject engages in that contributes to the necessities that are required in order to maintain their life and continued existence. This can simply comprise of the firsthand experiences of hunting, gathering, and preparing food, but labor can be broadened to include the tasks and conditions that dominate subjects. The environment that a subject occupies will determine the method by which they receive sustenance: the possibility for farming has specific land requirements, just as the feasibility of hunting for food depends on the availability of pursuable game. Thus the actual processes of labor are not absolute and equal standards for all subjects but are variable and dependent methods. The slave that exerts itself for the benefit of a master is still engaged in labor, regardless of whether they are directly occupied with sustenance, because it through the performance of their duties that they are granted the necessities of life. Nor is slavery the only example of the variable nature of labor, as other such cases could include dietary restrictions (allergies or digestive deficiencies), physical capabilities (body strength or tooth structure), and environmental conditions (changes in weather or degradation from usage).

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[9] Arendt describes the revelation of this individuality as "[the] disclosure of 'who' in contradistinction to 'what' somebody is—his qualities, gifts, talents, and shortcomings, which he may display or hide—is implicit in everything somebody says and does" (Arendt, *Human Condition* 179).

The specific details by which subjects are sustained define the manner of their labor, but it is not the fact that we are dominated by our need for sustenance that makes us subjects as objects too are governed by similar such authoritarian dictates. The distinction of domination between by biological sustenance and the other natural sciences fails to adequately separate objects and subjects, and fails to appreciate appreciate both the begins that arise from changing technologies and the possibility of collective subjects. The fundamental difference is that subjects have the possibility of opting out—the choice not to labor is unique to subjects and entirely unavailable to objects.

This basic identity choice is what Albert Camus called the "one truly serious philosophical problem" (Camus 3). It is a choice that is rarely political as it is a decision most commonly made in isolation, although it can be an attempt to enter into or create a *polis* wherein political action can occur even when made with another subject that does not recognize you as equal or capable. Labor in itself is not political, but the choice to forgo labor is foundational to the establishment of a political space. It is for this reason that objects can never engage in politics, as they always lack the requisite capacity to cease sustaining their self, to cease being *as they are*, but subjects may likewise be unable to be with others if they are incapable of, even if only briefly, abstaining from labor under penalty of death. Thus before one can be with others one must have both the capacity to cease laboring and the willingness to face their own death, as the breach of sustaining the self is always such a facing. This provides a brief period in which it is possible to engage in politics, before which the subject must either retreat back into labor to self-sustain or give up on sustenance altogether. One can likewise be freed from labor by the work of others, but it requires either charity or the transformation of subjects into objects as with slavery, and it still

does not completely remove biological maintenance. This is not to deny the obvious reality of subjects laboring together in order to ease the difficulty of such toiling, but it is to say that such group laboring is not necessarily political. To labor together is to be subjects that are operating as objects, because it is motivated solely by the processes of life that are shared among all and is indifferent to qualities that distinguish the group's subjects.

Forgoing labor can be done for the purpose establishing a *polis*, but the act of choosing not to labor is not, in itself, political and can only be undertaken in order to convince others to recognize one's subjecthood. It is for this reason that the hunger strike is fundamentally a pre-political act: by choosing not to engage in self-sustenance one seeks to reveal the distinguishing qualities that prove that they are not an object that can be dominated. Politics is the coming together of subjects to speak and act in such a way that reveals their individual and distinct qualities, but such togetherness is preconditioned by the fact that all are acknowledged by their shared quality of subjecthood. While a subject does not require recognition of its own nature in order to continue to exist as a subject, politics between subjects does demand such a recognition. It is not until we identify that which we share in common that the opportunity to be political is presented.

This form of political action does not involve the writing of laws, the managing of budgets, or the electing of officials. While it is the case that such processes are not labor, the differentiation between labor and action is not simply a binary of "if not labor, then action". This is not to say that politicians and bureaucrats are never engaged in labor. There is a way in which the execution of their duties contributes to the extension of their self, but while it is necessarily true that one must not be concerned with labor in order to be political, such a separation is not the case with regards to work. If labor is that which is concerned with the *immediate* continuance of

the subject, then work is the process connected to the possibility of endurance. While the biological subject cannot achieve permanence (nor even a small measure of it when compared with the scope of biological existence), it is possible to endure beyond both spatial and temporal boundaries. This is the domain of work and can be seen as a further extension of labor's possibility to be otherwise. The table is left behind after the craftsperson has fabricated it and, while it may not exist in perpetuity, it will endure long beyond the moment of its creation. In this way, the distinction between the outcomes of labor and work can be seen to be blurry. Consider the baking of bread, which may endure beyond the spatial existence of the baker in that location, but likely does not endure beyond their temporal existence.

When seen thus the duties of the politician are more akin to the craftsperson that attempts to establish a measure of permanence—although perhaps the artist is a better comparison. Where the artist reifies the world as it is the politician reifies the world as they would like it to be, but neither are truly creative because they both fail to establish new subjects and new modes of being subjects. This is a definition of creativity that mirrors the biblical Genesis narrative where the *logos* of God establishes the world; it is not the discovery of tools that is creative and brings about a new world, but the declaration and understanding that those tools are a necessary component of existence. When a tool becomes an aspect of the subject and not merely a disposable object, when the distinction between a device and its user is broken down, *that* is the transformation of the subject into a cyborg. The subject that requires the structures of capitalism in order to earn a wage and sustain their self is as much a cyborg as the being that requires glasses.

The first identity choice—to be or not to be, to continue that necessary task of sustaining the self—is that negation which permits the cyborg being and all other identities, but that turning

away from life is always a facing towards death. Death is the transformation of the subject into the object. The life of labor does not resolve this problem of death, but simply avoids its gazing abyss. “Even the boldest of us,” writes Nietzsche, “have but seldom the courage for what we really *know*” (Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols* 3). We know that we are going to die. It takes courage to both be willing to face that knowledge and while facing it, to act—and this bravery must be renewed in each moment, because the possibility to return to labor is always present. This subject is marked by their status as a not-laborer, but overcoming the demands for sustenance is done with the knowledge that such maintenance will allow them merely to linger, not endure. Even the worker that extends their self by the production of objects that have the possibility of remaining after their death is not made permanent, but is simply lingering.

The subject that accepts impermanence, that accepts mortality as the necessary condition of its existence as a subject, will have overcome their attachment to attachment. This is the Buddhist *nirvana*, the Hindu *satya*, and the Nietzschean *amor fati,* but the courage necessary to be unbound in these ways is not the ultimate form of the subject instead it is a transformation of the subject into an object.[10] Perpetual boundlessness and totalizing boundaries represent the two ends of the spectrum of being, but both amount to a rejection of our subjecthood. The nature of the subject is thus neither boundedness nor boundlessness, but a perpetual and paradoxical commitment to both. The subject is being in flux that must step, but always missteps and finds that it has not made itself. It has stepped into a being that has been imposed upon it. Yet it is still imbued with the capacity to be otherwise.

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[10] In *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Arendt articulates that selflessness is a rejection of life, because that which makes “life troublesome and anguished” is the desire to sustain the self (Arendt *Origins* 315). The renunciation of this capacity is a renunciation of that which makes the subject and a “yearning ... for being just a number and functioning only as a cog” (Arendt *Origins* 329). While it may be the case that such a spirituality is noble (because it would be a return to the transcendent divine), the implications of such a complete rejection of worldly affairs does not allow for the sociability of politics.

The goal then should not be to create an identity structure that describes all past, present and future beings, nor should it be to prescribe an ideal form towards which all subjects should strive. The former will always be false and the latter will always be unattainable, and neither are useful in meeting unimagined challenges that the future might hold. Instead the goal is to establish a mode of thinking about identity that allows individuals to transition between a plurality of selves and to open our individuality to the possibility of change depending on the situations in which we are found and the other subjects with whom we share environments with. We must begin our selves by beginning and when we realize that we have mis-stepped, when we realize that we have been imposed upon, we begin again. John Paul Lederach calls such a mode of thought "paradoxical curiosity" wherein one "suspends judgment in favor of exploring presented contradictions, at face and at heart value, for the possibility that there exists a value beyond what is currently known that supersedes the contradiction" (Lederach 36). Accordingly, one must be willing to accept false identities in order to explore the conflict that arises from them, because the outright negation of a character is as untrue as the original imposition.

Any imposition of identity is a categorization which is always an attempt to describe and bind something according to an ideal. The unique distinctness that makes up the subject's individual history necessarily makes such generalizations false. Even attempts to establish our own identities are caught in the impositions of others, because we do not exist in isolation from other beings and our very grammars and understandings of phenomena are rooted in our relations to others. In acting we cannot even know who it is that we will reveal to the world, because even within ourselves we are unable to overcome the impositions in which we are caught. Each known linguistic expression fails by the very fact that it is already known. It is only that which is unique

and unknown that can ever adequately express individuality, but when it becomes heard or seen in the world it loses its uniqueness and becomes a possibility for others. Thus while our state of distinct individuality is a fact of our existence, the expressions of our individuality are only ever instantaneous and temporary:

> The moment we want to say *who* somebody is, our very vocabulary leads us astray into saying *what* he is; we get entangled in a description of qualities that he necessarily shares with others like him; we begin to describe a type or a "character" in the old meaning of the word, with the result that his specific uniqueness escapes us (Arendt, *Human Condition* 181)

In this way, all conversations are metaphors for the conversations that we would like to have with each other, if only we could express what is true. The problem is that we are incapable; and yet our inability to speak truth does not paralyze us into silence. We speak—except in the case of, "you had to be there" and even that is an attempt to articulate that which cannot be articulated—and so we fail, but as Samuel Beckett says, "Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail better." (Beckett 89).

The unique nature of the subject means that such a failure is at the core of all identity articulations, regardless of whether they are imposed upon as burdens or self-affirmed. We accept such false constructions of identity because it is impossible to speak and act together in concert without doing so. An equal common ground of some sort is required in order to understand each other, but the appearance of our individual unique qualities requires a willingness to leap away from such firm ground. One must attempt to articulate the unspeakable or to do the impossible, that is to say to be otherwise than one already is as a member of the body politic, lest the *polis* loses its temporary nature and the involved subjects endeavor to sustain it. This permanent *polis* corrupts action and the distinguishing of uniqueness, but it does so under the illusion of labor.

Instead of being a realm wherein we can express our subject-hood, it becomes a totalizing space where the bodily subject is devalued in favor of the political subject. The subject imagines itself "as a body which takes itself as its object, forced into a permanent posture of negative narcissism or, more precisely, a narcissistically nourished self-beratement" (Butler, *Psychic Life* 82).

This inward "bad conscience" journey of the human being is, following Nietzsche, "an illness, there is no doubt about that, but an illness as pregnancy is an illness" (Nietzsche, *Basic Writings* 19). This is to say that identity is necessarily destructive to the human being, but his reference to pregnancy is meant to suggest that bad conscience comes with it also the possibility to creation equal to its destructive sickness. We are created as subjects, as human and animal, as male and female, and as heterosexual and homosexual; and these identity constructions allow us to be and say things. We gain the phenomenological and grammatical subjects from these fictions of identity, but these are *necessary* fictions for subjects interacting with each other in the world. If we desired to refrain from social and political relationships, we could eschew such inventions—although the desire to avoid contact does not mean that such a solitary existence is even possible. Further, while it may be the case that individual subjects could isolate themselves from each other, an individual cannot remove their history of interactions which will continue to inform their understanding of both themselves and the world in which they live. Yet the subject can still reject its uniqueness and choose an object life, pursuing only labor and seeking never to face death. Such an existence will inevitably fail to overcome mortality and the subject will be wholly and finally transformed into an object.

While this transformation is the eventuality for all subjects and even the products of our work will merely persist longer than our bodily selves, there is still reason to believe that speech

and action can influence the world in such a way that the subject endures long beyond both their reproductive and productive existences. The transformation of individual distinctness to potentiality for other subjects is not merely persistence. Just as it is impossible for a subject to escape their own personal history, so too is a body of subjects bound to that which has been seen and heard. Not bound to follow, but bound to consider as a fact. This does not sustain the biological being of flesh and sinew; it is a psychic imprinting of an individual subject upon the very plurality in which it exists. The scope of each impression will vary upon the nature of the unique act as well as the degree to which other subjects believe that possibility to be worthwhile, but once seen or heard, its influence is impossible to entirely escape.

Consider the mythopoetic status of ancient Greek heroes that are still relevant to discussions of the nature of contemporary existence; consider, to borrow freely from J. Edward Chamberlin, the ceremonies of belief that cultures and peoples use to maintain an understanding of their place in the world; and consider what Thomas King calls the truth about stories, "that [that is] all we are" (King 2). The individual speakers and actors within all such origin mythologies have long since passed on, but their narratives have continued to inform others in ways that could not have possibly been imagined at the time. The flight and fall of Icarus can be understood generally as a warning against hubris, a reminder of the possibility of failure, or an expression of the conflict between human beings and the natural world, but the connotations of the story also prefigure the development of aviation and aeronautics. Icarus can, despite his temporal placement, be articulated as an advocate for the escapism of space exploration and the journey to the stars. While it cannot possibly be the case that this is the particular impression that Icarus

wished to leave behind when he flew too close to the sun, it cannot be denied that the passage of millennia have been unable to remove the psychic markings left behind by the son of Daedalus.

We are haunted by the *figure* of Icarus because of the tragic nature of his display of uniqueness, but this form of psychic endurance comes at the expense of one's biological existence as a subject. Yet the literal death of Icarus helps to explain why it is the case that individual subjects choose to accept the termination of their own uniqueness in favor of an authoritarian imposition of identity: the facing away from sustaining a self is difficult because of the chaotic nature of the world after that initial choice. We have complete control over our choice to labor, but once we choose to act in the world we may lose the ability to ever return to labor, and even if we do not physically die we will never be able to return to being the subject that we were prior. In facing our corporeal death we are necessarily changed by the process; according to Nietzsche such a sober and dangerous existence involved being "made of glass; woe unto us if were merely *bump* ourselves! And all is lost if we *fall*!" (Nietzsche, *Gay Science* 198).

It is for this reason that those within the *polis* establish the protections of legal structures, political agreements, and individual rights. These institutions act as a guarantee against some of the unpredictability of interacting in the world and while "no punishment has ever possessed enough power of deterrence to prevent the commission of crimes" there is a greater degree of security provided by the threat of punishment than without it (Arendt, *Eichmann* 273). In this space, the manner of endurance can transcend the individual subject into the realm of ideas: the psychic marking that is left behind is a story that does not appeal to a particular individual and thus becomes a possibility for more subjects to see within themselves. The potential pool of subjects with whom one can enter into a *polis* with becomes wider, increasing the chance that the

psychic markings of any one individual subject will endure. Understood in this manner, the choice to accept the impositions of identity is done in order to permit the possibility of sharing the distinct qualities that shows the falsity of such an imposition. The paradox of identity is that it is only by granting the premise that we are as others view us to be that we are capable of proving that we are not.

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