

## 26 COMMENTS :



**B.M.W. said...**

What about a woman "going into labor"? That usually results in a durable product, doesn't it? ;)

Seriously though, intriguing ideas here. I have to go away and contemplate them for awhile and work up a better response that we can all act on.

October 07, 2015 1:25 am 



**B.M.W. said...**

You know, if I recall correctly, Marx spent most of his time unemployed, living off the charity of others while he wrote his manifesto. I guess he only admired labor when other people were doing it.

For me, when I started hearing about the "nobility of labor" in socialist rhetoric, I feel like someone's going to put a shovel in my hand and push me towards the nearest ditch. Or worse yet, I think of that dreaded inscription "Arbeit macht frei."

We talked awhile back about Marx and religion and how he saw it as the "opiate of the masses", a placebo for their suffering. But I almost feel like he was doing the same thing from a different angle. "No. No. Keep digging! You look very noble doing that."

October 07, 2015 1:57 am 



**Vincent said...**

Yes, one can disparage Marx, but that is *reaction* rather than *action*. Arendt begins her chapter on Labor by announcing that she is going to criticize Marx, which she says is unfortunate in a time when those who pretty much make their living from Marxian ideas have decided to switch sides and become professional anti-Marxists. She reminds herself and us against joining that bandwagon with a quote originally referring to Rousseau:

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Vincent said...

I'm sorry Bryan, I didn't mean it that way at all. In the comments I try wherever possible to bring it back to the subject of the post. In this instance, Arendt speaks of Marx re labor because he's the main one to have raised its status. But in her view he praises labor for the wrong reasons. And if there is homework to be done, the burden is entirely upon me. I shall check what she says on this point more precisely, report back, and revise my careless phrase "Marx placed labor as the most admirable human activity" as needed.

This homework, this "labor of love" to fill my idleness and provide some light entertainment, does not extend to the reading of Karl Marx's actual works, I hasten to add. Hannah is challenge enough.

October 07, 2015 8:47 am



Vincent said...

It was indeed worthwhile to debate the adjectives he used to praise labor with, and this to-and-fro discussion leads to much-needed correction of what I wrote.

I've replaced an offending paragraph, as follows:

Old paragraph:

By contrast, Marx placed labor as the most admirable human activity, not for keeping us connected to the earth, but in support of his materialist view of man. Arendt accuses him of valuing productivity above all else, in stark reversal of ancient values.

New paragraph:

By contrast, Marx valued "labor-power" as the ultimate source of wealth, on account of its material productivity. From Arendt's point of view he fails to distinguish labor from work, as explained below.

Your critique as ever is valuable. I would be glad of more, from you or other readers.

October 07, 2015 11:57 am





Vincent said...

Another change I've made is to replace [this photo of a litter-picker](#) with one I took this morning from the bedroom window, of the man I'm always glad to see on our street.

October 07, 2015 12:05 pm



Tom said...

I find the distinctions made by Hannah Arendt between work and labour far too artificial. Added to that are the various usages of the those words and the semantic problems that arise. In the end I fall back on the physics definition of work which is simply a measure of the energy used against the force of gravity. Anything else to which the word work is applied is activity, a necessary means of exercising the material body, and thus keeping fit for purpose for as long as possible. Thus work, e.g. climbing a hill can be an act which is either a drudge or a pleasure. As with all words taken from a discipline in which meanings are exact, over time those words become woolly and reduced in meaning. For this reason it is becoming increasingly difficult to communicate ideas and experiences in any meaningful way. We are steadily building a latter day Tower of Babel.

October 07, 2015 7:17 pm



Natalie d'Arbeloff said...

Tom's comment expresses my own response to this. Hannah Arendt's view of the world and of humanity is, for me, over-complicated and 'academic' - by that I mean that if it were a scent, it would smell like conference rooms and academic institutions and huge piles of documents sitting on desks. The way she divides up experience doesn't correspond to the way life is actually lived. Contemplation, action and work are not necessarily separate: for instance artistic creation (and I include all forms of it) intensely involves all three, simultaneously. And individuals with an active spiritual life (eg Thomas Merton, St. Francis of Assisi and many others) could be contemplative while fully engaged in action of all sorts. The artist/writer/philosopher Michel Seuphor, who was my friend and, in a sense, mentor had a motto in Latin "Labor improbus omnia vincit". In this case, "improbus" is meant as passionate or wholehearted or committed.

October 07, 2015 8:55 pm



Vincent said...

Yes, it would be much easier if words were defined precisely as in the sciences, but dictionaries tell a different story. Outside of specific disciplines, the meanings of words evolve and divide according to usage by the community of speakers. "Work" had all sorts of meanings dependent on context back to the beginnings of the English language, & it wasn't till 1826 that the Frenchman Coriolis defined it as a measurable quantity of something. Karl Marx needed a word for his ideas, he called them "labor" and "labor power". As Bryan alluded, midwives needed a word too, they hit on "labor" and gave it a precise meaning in their specialized field (The OED tracks this usage as far back as 1472. The word "travail" was also used with the same meaning, first recorded in 1297).

Hannah Arendt needed a set of word to express her thoughts. We can see that she had difficulties, because in her book she often resorts to terms in Greek or Latin. But in the end she had to use some, and define them as exactly as she needed. I can only apologize for attempting the impossible feat of introducing her ideas on *The Human Condition* in so few words. She knows there is a problem for the reader, for she says "The distinction between labor and work which I propose is unusual." I've managed to convey only a tiny part of how she tries to establish that distinction, and is pretty much forced to admit failure, as they get blurry in the middle.

But I did give a warning at the beginning of my piece, if not a clear one, when I say "reading [her book], you don't discover *what* to think, as with lesser books. You learn *how* to think". It's a case where no definite answers are given, and the journey matters more than the destination. Or to put it another way, she tries to trace a history of certain ideas, and interpret them in her own way. This is not to be confused with philosophy, but I can't point out that distinction either. She simply establishes her own ground, and it is hard work, of the mental kind which is probably not measurable by physics. I say "probably" but if you listened to Melvyn Bragg's "In Our Time" on the topic of Perpetual Motion, that too was discussed. See <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b06c06nd>



I think we might agree that when you enter an existing discipline as a layman, you have to learn its established terminology. Having become a medical secretary, my wife K bwas sent on a Medical Terminology course, and had to learn a lot of Greek prefixes, roots and suffixes. For example, *anosmia*—no sense of smell; *hyposmia*—diminished sense of smell; *hyperosmia*—exaggerated sense of smell.

The real difficulty is when you desire to express your experiences without resort to any established discipline; thus Arendt, trying to break new ground in her study of the human condition. She looks at Aristotle, Marx & many others, uses their terms as far as she can, but needs to push further, share her new ideas. She struggles, it's hard going for her and not too easy for the reader either.

And thus your own investigations, as recorded on your blog & notebooks. How to share these experiences, without falling into an existing Christian, Shamanic or other groove and being led where you don't want to go? It's even hard to make sense of experience within your own head, without making use of language. Forgive me, Tom. I'm just guessing all this, from hints you have given over time.

October 07, 2015 9:26 pm 🗑️




Vincent said...

Thanks for your comment, Natalie, which I found sandwiched between Tom's comment and my response. It's my fault for attempting too much and of course one cannot judge whether or not she succeeded in what she set out to do without reading her her book, not necessarily from cover to cover (I don't think I managed that myself, and it needs a couple of readings to get the hang of it.)

However, I question some of what you say. If her views are over-complicated, isn't that a reflection of how the world and humanity are? Can there be any simplistic way of encompassing the human condition? At various times in her life, Arendt *was* an academic, and inhabited academic institutions. Her reading and knowledge of languages was immense. Anyone who absorbs all that is certainly a scholar. I may have misunderstood you, but if you have only read my post you can't have picked up her scent in its pure form, but only a clumsily synthesized version of it from this "perpetual lab".

As I've recorded in the post, I can identify separate aspects of my life which taken together correspond to all four modes of being. So the distinctions she makes between contemplation, labor, work and action are a good fit for my life. I haven't examined how they combine in a single activity, as in your artistic activities, which to me represent an enviable way of living not available to everyone unless the calling and dedication are strong enough.

Having said all this, I respect the spontaneity of your non-academic and uncomplicated reaction, as being an essential quality of *you*. As for Hannah Arendt, she had to do what she had to do, and I hold her in equally high regard for that, and can't see how she could have possibly done it better in one lifetime.

October 07, 2015 9:54 pm 



B.M.W. said...


*This comment has been removed by the author.*

October 07, 2015 11:11 pm 



B.M.W. said...

*This comment has been removed by the author.*

October 08, 2015 12:06 am 



B.M.W. said...

I deleted these last two comments because I feel like I'm picking a fight here, and that really isn't my intention and I don't know how it got to be that way. I made my initial comments above in the spirit of agreement, thinking we were on the same page. Next thing I know I find a shower of bullets and backhanded remarks raining down on me.

October 08, 2015 1:56 am 





Natalie d'Arbeloff said...

"Can there be any simplistic way of encompassing the human condition? "

There's as big a difference between "simplistic" and "simple" as there is between "complicated" and "over-complicated". It would be stupid (simplistic is generally stupid) of me to say the human condition is simple. One would first have to define "human condition". I'm not unfamiliar with Arendt's work and wasn't judging it merely from your extracts. I'm not doubting her erudition, scholarship or contributions to knowledge. What I was saying is that some truths - self-evident from experience of life as it is lived and observed - can seem to be profound and wise discoveries when expressed in academic language - ie: imbued with the 'authority' of words which over-complicate and over-decorate. In my view this kind of language elicits admiration but discourages debate, discourages dissent or questioning, discourages the kind of observation which sees that the emperor has no clothes.

October 08, 2015 2:28 am



Vincent said...


OK, Bryan, I have of course read your deleted remarks as I was notified of them by email. It's not that I am in any way defending Karl Marx. I don't like him at all. Your earlier comments made me realize that I had lazily misrepresented him as described by Hannah Arendt. I had to correct this. I don't see our discussions as *debates* in the sense of a kind of contest as organized for example in the House of Commons or the Oxford Union, where a motion is proposed and either passed or defeated.

I see our discussions as free speech, period, and find them personally useful because they help me see where I'm wrong. I can't help it if you detect bullets and backhanded remarks aimed at you. I can only apologize for conveying to you that impression. I have certainly made remarks about America, and said "present company always excepted".

But there is a kind of debate which I would call reactive, which involves attack and counter-attack, and the pity of it is to encourage a shallow kind of thinking where the participants believe themselves to be supporting the rightness of a cause, as opposed to truth itself. As happens in war and politics.



What has mattered to me most in the post and ensuing discussion is to be factual in presenting the topic, i.e. accurate and truthful. I am sure it can be done respectfully to all points of view.

October 08, 2015 6:38 am 



Vincent said...

Natalie, I would say that Arendt's book was her own attempt to define the human condition. I don't see how one could "first" define it. She produced a definition of more than 300 pages. I agree with you that some academic language is characterized as you say, just as some works presented as literature may have scant literary merit. The systems of preferment and tenure in universities encourage such language as you describe.

I can only say that Arendt's writing is of a higher order, indeed the highest order I've encountered in this kind of field. Compared with hers, John Gray's (as in *Straw Dogs*, which Bryan found repulsive from my review of it a few years ago) is sloppy and journalistic; or perhaps one could say *impressionistic* in the sense that it conveys a general impression without the individual details standing up to closer scrutiny.

When you speak of the difference between "simple" & "simplistic" I wonder if you are thinking of persons such as Thomas Merton, St Francis or Krishnamurti? But their aims were not comparable. They had a different agenda: not to make distinctions but see a unity.

An excellent example of what I mean is to be found in the life of St Thomas Aquinas who produced a monumental work *Summa Theologica* - "The Human Condition" of his day. Near the end of his life he had a mystical experience after which he wrote nothing, explaining that his vision made him feel that all he had written was like so much straw.

Nevertheless, his written works are still held in high regard as a contribution to philosophy comparable to that of Aristotle.

October 08, 2015 7:02 am 



**B.M.W. said...**

Fair enough. Sorry if I caused any trouble over here.

October 08, 2015 7:18 am



**Vincent said...**

Not to me you haven't. I'd call it a lively free-and-easy discussion.

October 08, 2015 9:22 am



**ellie said...**

I would not find Blake worth studying if his thought was not congruent with what I learned from wise teachers and from the life experiences which were given to me. Perhaps what I look for in an author is communication which is on a wave length to which my own inner being resonates. Although we need to be stretched to reach beyond what we have absorbed previously, it may not be productive to force ourselves into pathways created by others for their own development.

I remember reading that when Joseph Campbell felt that he knew something that he could communicate to a wider public beyond the academic community, he worked to change his technique of writing. It was not his content that was too difficult for the audience he wanted to reach. It was the terse, dense expression using unfamiliar vocabulary and complex structure that needed changing. He succeeded in opening a large population to a mythopoeic dimension of which they were totally unaware. He 'followed his bliss' but expressed it in layman's terms.

As for Blake he recognized the need both to 'invent' and 'execute.'

<http://woeandjoy.blogspot.com/2015/02/the-inventor.html>

October 08, 2015 3:30 pm



Natalie d'Arbeloff said...

Vincent, in your post before this one you were talking about making an 'artwork' of your personal life on a day to day basis. The striped socks drying in the sun seemed to me a lovely metaphor, combining observation of the here and now with a sense of order and design spontaneously perceived. It strikes me that this direct approach has been dropped and we're back to abstract discussion of other people's concepts, eg Hannah Arendt, Merton, Krishnamurti, Thomas Aquinas, etc. Of course there's nothing wrong with that and loads of interesting and relevant quotes could be presented. But I wonder if there isn't (in all of us) a tendency to distract ourselves from moments of personal insight, little flashes of inspiration that could, perhaps, lead us into new territory. We don't trust our 'little insights' enough (too 'simple'?) so we go looking for support from authorities, past or present Wise Men/Women whose thoughts and pronouncements are certified to be of the 'highest order'.

October 08, 2015 7:33 pm



Vincent said...

!! I have nothing further to say.

October 10, 2015 5:36 pm



Natalie d'Arbeloff said...

I didn't feel the least bit offended by your comments, Vincent. and hope that mine didn't cause offense either. To express or to hear a viewpoint that's different is, it seems to me, one of the pleasures of intelligent conversation. To agree completely with someone's views is fine, as it is to be totally agreed with. But, speaking for myself, I'm happy when a new slant is introduced to some concept I've expressed, even if that slant is the opposite of mine. However I agree that implying (or stating) that the other's viewpoint is right and mine wrong is going to degenerate into a fight - polite or otherwise! Again I have to re-iterate that this is why I much prefer face-to-face conversations to comment-box exchanges.

October 10, 2015 5:58 pm



Davoh said...

um, many changes in local computer systems. Am attempting to 'keep up' with community communication.

However - am elderish old basket - case - prefer to take the 250cc motorbike to 'have a chat' with the locals.

If, and when i decide to publish details - my choice (will never happen) -

The future belongs to the children of the children ...

October 15, 2015 5:17 am