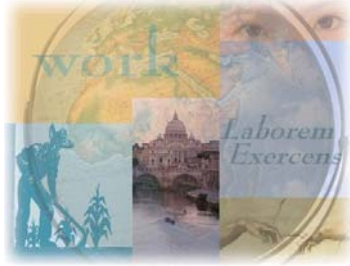


Work as Key to the Social Question

The Great Social and Economic Transformations and the Subjective Dimension of Work



The Criteria of Duration and Necessity for Designating Work Activity:

Philosophical and Theological Perspectives in Light of the Writings of Hannah Arendt

by Mathias Nebel

If I were to be asked which question seems most pressing to me in the area of Christian social ethics, I would answer without hesitation: the question of work. This represents a challenge requiring a philosophical and theological reflection that goes to the very roots of our anthropology.

With the appearance of the Encyclical *Laborem exercens* in 1981, the Church made a definitive break with a vision that saw work as a consequence of original sin and an occasion of penitence for Christians. It seems to me that this document — noteworthy as it is under many aspects — does not however avoid a fundamental ambiguity: how do we distinguish the particular activity of work from the larger concept of human action? This fact is far from insignificant and the manifestation of this ambiguity can be seen in what has been called the phenomenon of "economic growth without employment", which most of the industrialized countries experienced in the 1980s and 1990s. In the desire to vindicate the value of work and its priority over capital, *Laborem exercens* accentuates the similarities between human action and divine action, and thus finds itself without the means to confront this historical development in the social question.

This observation is not valid for the Church alone, quite the contrary. Short-sightedness with regard to the structural changes in the labour market was hardly anticipated by the social sciences, and even less by the competent State institutions. It is precisely when one realizes that the increase in unemployment is no longer caused solely by economic conditions but also by structural elements that the identification of work with employment will begin to disappear. The breach was made and, in my opinion, it has not yet been closed. From the moment that work is no longer identified with or recognized in the economic compensation that it entails, what makes it different from other human social activities? What are its distinguishing characteristics? [1] This is an insidious question. It cannot be answered without going back to the "origin of things", that is, without engaging in

philosophy in those areas where, in action, the social dimension of man is given.

The question that I ask myself is therefore the following: how can we recognize and define this particular activity that we designate with the term "work"? Such a task, we may as well admit, goes far beyond what can be said in one article and is moreover beyond the scope of my particular competence. Therefore, it is an open question that I propose, one that necessarily requires the comments and insights of people who are wiser and more knowledgeable. It is for this reason that I shall be cautious and avoid going into the arena by myself, preferring instead the company of someone who is greater than myself: Hannah Arendt. Her thought becomes the starting point for my reflection.

"THE HUMAN CONDITION", CONTEXT AND PERSPECTIVES

Hannah Arendt's best-known work [2], which immediately precedes "The Human Condition" [3], is her research on "The Origins of Totalitarianism" [4]. She seeks to present therein the *how* and the *why* of totalitarian regimes that were capable of giving rise to extermination camps. Although her inquiry ends with an acknowledgment of failure, or rather at an impasse where thought comes up against the stumbling block of the question of evil, her description of totalitarianism remains particularly interesting. After the First World War, in a Germany reduced to a mass society, the Nazis violently reject the idea of politics, as well as that of political institutions, to embrace instead the notion of *movement*, which they claim as their inspiring principle. The National-Socialist Party is, according to them, nothing more than a function of the inexorable natural evolution of mankind. By means of a characteristic distortion, the Nazis claimed to be the interpreters of this naturalistic determinism and took on the function as the catalyst of evolution by eliminating inferior peoples and races, which were destined in any event to disappear. This determinism condemns victims labeled unconditionally as "*non-beings in the world*". Although alive, they are no longer "*of the world*", being already relegated by nature to the ranks of extinction.

The Human Condition is presented in full continuity with this first investigation. According to Ricoeur, who wrote the preface for the French edition of 1988, Hannah Arendt strives here to seek and describe the conditions of a *non-totalitarian* world, that is to say, to explain the foundations of a society that guarantees resistance to possible totalitarian tendencies. [5] For her, it is within this particular framework that the ancient question of the meaning of work and of its significance for human action is to be found.

With Ricoeur, I see the originality and the strength of her analysis in the painstaking attention that she pays to the temporal dimension of this action. [6] "*If the totalitarian hypothesis is that of the absence of the stability of human nature, then the most appropriate criterion for the new investigation must consist in an evaluation of the different human activities from the temporal point of view of their durability.*" [7] This hypothesis is the starting point of my preliminary attempt to re-read her analysis of human action, [8] in order afterwards to return to the notions of *duration* and *durability* that provide the structure for

her thought and comprise the philosophical and theological interest of her reflection on work.

THREE SPHERES OF MEANING: LABOUR, WORK, AND ACTION

"I propose the term 'vita activa' to designate three fundamental human activities: labour, work and action. These are fundamental because each of them corresponds to the basic conditions in which life on earth is given to man." [9] These distinctions in human activity constitute three spheres of meaning, three orders of significance.

The three spheres of meaning of human activity: labour

Labour is characterized by *necessity*. This characteristic arises from the fact that man, in his body, belongs to the order of nature where, subject to the permanent movement of generation and decay, he enters into the great cycle of living things. Man's biological life, ever tending towards death, requires the permanent effort of labour that maintains the body in health by means of the products of human activity. Without this labour, life could not avoid fading away. It is therefore a necessary reality, essentially private, solitary and incommunicable. [10] Nonetheless, if the fact of belonging to the order of nature is an integral part of the human condition, it does not reflect what makes this condition unique: man's ability to think. The endless movement of the natural order is not capable of duration, which resides in man as his most fundamental dimension. [11] An "of-the-world" permanence [12] is foreign to the cycle of generation and decay. Moreover, it is opposed to this movement because of its trait of durability. Consequently, there can be no peaceful coexistence between nature and the world. These two realities mutually exclude each other in their fundamental characteristics and only the constant effort of man to build his world makes it enduring despite the movement of universal decay. [13] Therefore, this biological necessity is experienced principally as *alienation*, an effort that man must make daily *against* nature in order to ensure his survival.

The status of this necessity is definitively ambiguous, because the force by which it is imposed can prevail over every other activity, even to the point of destroying the human world and reducing mankind to its animal state. [14] That is why Arendt designates man in this activity as an *animal laborans*. In like manner, the term "labour" is used to designate every activity that is connected with the vital necessity of endlessly renewing life.

We must however be on guard against a very common oversimplification that tends to conceal under the heading of "need" the distinction that exists between the activity of production and that of consumption. These two activities, which belong to the natural order, correspond to the two moments of the physical cycle, that of generation (production) and that of decay (consumption). In exactly the same manner, these two moments run together uninterruptedly in a daily cycle. *"Labour expends itself in reproducing a life that is*

constantly dying". [15]

Arendt draws from this a fundamental conclusion: destruction by consumption is inherent in the purpose of all productivity. This activity is therefore insignificant "in-the-world", it is foreign to it — it is not "of-the-world", Arendt says [16] — although it is necessary for the world's preservation. Productivity, exactly like consumption, is by that very reason futile. Closed within the unending flow of the essentially private movement of generation and decay, it is impossible for production and consumption to have any kind of durability or to open themselves to a "common-world".

What is true of activity is equally true of the object produced and consumed. What is produced is produced in view of being consumed. That is part of its nature, part of the finality given to it by man, that of being perishable. And it is the consumption-oriented character of the products of labour that constitutes their perishable nature, since these two phenomena cannot be separated. Therefore, things produced in and by this biological process are characterized by *transitoriness*. They appear but for a moment, as one of the forms of the production-consumption cycle. [17] According to Arendt, every consumer good is *ephemeral*: "*The least durable of tangible things are those needed for the life process itself. Their consumption barely survives the act of their production ... such as - if they are not consumed by use - (they) will decay and perish by themselves*". [18]

The three spheres of meaning of human activity: work

Work, this is made up of the objects that are created to be *used* and not consumed. [19] The sum of them represents the human ingenuity, the world in which man lives. They are characterized by their *durability*, [20] the capacity to withstand wear, which bestows upon them the function of memory for the world. They are what gives stability to human ingenuity, a solidity that alone makes it possible for it to be a source of shelter for that "*unstable and mortal creature*" [21] that is man. The function of work is to stabilize human life.

The activity that presides over the creation of work is fabrication. It stands by itself. It is the achievement of the artisan who envisages the object that he wishes to fashion before he works. This mental image is then made reality, in the primary sense of the work, that is, it becomes a concrete thing. [22] This mental image will gain for the object that permanence that makes it part of enduring reality. Unlike labour, therefore, it is a free activity, exercised without any constraint whatsoever. Arendt designates man as *homo faber* when he is engaged in this activity.

The process of making is wholly determined by the categories of ends and means. The object fashioned is an end, in the sense that the process of fabrication finds its fulfillment in it. In like manner, this same process in its entirety is merely the means to this end. Here, then, is another difference that distinguishes work from all other types of activity. Whereas fabrication has a precise and foreseeable beginning and end, and while it takes place within a determined span of time, labour and action have no set time limits. The

endless repetition that characterizes labour only comes to an end when life finishes, and action, conditioned by others, is incapable of having a foreseeable beginning or end.

The three spheres of meaning of human activity: action

I will be briefer concerning the sphere of action, not that it is less important — quite the contrary — but in order to concentrate further on the question that appears decisive for the analysis of labour proposed by Arendt.

The principal criterion of the category of action is the *revelation of the agent in speech and in action*. Only man can communicate *himself* instead of merely communicating something. "*In man, otherness, which he shares with everything that is, and distinctness, which he shares with everything alive, become uniqueness*". [23] To this characteristic, which for our part we place under the concept of person, is added that which Arendt calls the human condition of plurality: "*that is, of living as a distinct and unique being among equals*". [24] This human sociality is the fundamental condition of speech and action. If, before speech or action, there were no network of human relationships, the revelation of "who" would have neither spectators nor listeners. This means that the "who" must *appear*, become *visible* and be seen; that the "who" must be *audible* and be heard. Action and speech as the place where the revelation of the agent takes place therefore requires a *space for appearing* that, like the stage of a theatre where the actors make their appearance, permits them to be seen and heard. This is where men "*reveal actively their unique personal identities and thus make their appearance in the human world*". [25]

Speech, in the context of plurality, should respond first of all to the question "Who are you?". For this reason, it is the privileged means for revealing the "who" of the agent.

Action reveals man as *the one who initiates and reacts*, the one who *begins* something in the world, that is to say, as a *principle of freedom* capable of the unexpected, of innovation.

The "who" cannot completely conceal itself, and it always comes to be seen in action or in word. However, under certain circumstances these two activities lose this capacity, precisely when "human togetherness is lost" and the individual disappears into the masses. [26] Both action and word will then be empty, without meaning, since they have no author, which will never be the case with a work of art, the meaning of which can be grasped whether one knows the artist or not.

This capacity of action and word, then, carries the mark of *fragility*, owing as much to the uncertainty that surrounds the project contained in action when it interacts with others as to the fragility of the subject himself.

HERMENEUTICAL CRITICISM OF THE NOTION OF DURATION

The distinction between work and product, a false distinction

If the description of human activity presented by Arendt is frequently striking because of the relevance of her remarks for the modern world, it nonetheless leaves more than just a few of her readers sceptical. She is criticized as much for her methodology [27] as for the inadequacy of the manner in which she distinguishes reality and, more broadly, the ineffective nature of her analysis. [28]

This is particularly the case concerning the division that she introduces between product and work, labour and fabrication. This distinction, connected to the Marxist analysis of labour as alienation, reflects the conditions of the industrial world at its beginning and no longer corresponds to the modern diversification of methods of labour. But, even prescindendo from this first remark, it seems impossible to maintain, as she does, the distinction between work and product under the sole aspect of their durability. [29] Productivity or fabrication does not condition the finality of the object as strongly as she tries to maintain. Between the person who works or labours and the object that is the result of this activity there is in fact the human environment and the use that it makes of these objects, which contributes to the meaning that they have. A striking example of this phenomenon can be seen in the cross, built to be an instrument of a slow and painful death, but which has become for Christians a symbol of salvation and life. The original finality of an object has been replaced in this case by the meaning given to it by Christ. In a word, the creative activity and, consequently, the finality that inspires it is not the only source of meaning for an object.

These brief remarks confute a large part of the distinctions that she makes. In placing emphasis on characteristic traits, she overstates the distance that separates the formal plan from the complexity of reality and imposes a distinction of the intellectual order on the reality of human activity, where labour, work and action are inextricably intermingled.

This criticism is justified, but to me it seems to miss the essential point that Hannah Arendt is making: is it possible to distinguish a specific activity called "work" starting with the criteria of its necessity [30] and its capacity to be enduring?

Of these two criteria, that of being enduring is proper to Arendt and appears intimately connected with one of the constants of her philosophical thought. This is a theme that, under one form or another, runs throughout all of her writings. We had previously noted the importance of this concept at the time of her inquiry into totalitarianism, characterized by an incessant momentum linked both to the order of nature and to that of history. Seen from this perspective, her analysis of human activity likewise reveals the importance of temporality. In this context, durability is seen as an essential quality of the *world-of-man*, a condition *sine qua non* for the revelation of the subject. Lastly, in her uncompleted trilogy *The Life of the Mind*, durability is intimately associated to the activity of thinking [31]. In my opinion, it is in this last work that this concept is most fully

developed.

The activity of thinking and temporality

"Where are we when we think?" [32] This deceptively ingenuous question allows her to associate thinking and durability explicitly. Since thinking makes it possible to withdraw from the world of phenomena, man is capable of perceiving a temporality, that is, he is capable of making equally present in the act of thinking «what no longer is» and "what is not yet"; he is thus able to give a meaning to this concept of duration.

Let us consider this again in a more detailed manner. Duration is experienced primarily in the continuity of action, particularly in the process of fabricating an object, where the beginning and the end of the action set very precise limits to duration. What is true about fabrication is equally true about action, although we cannot in this case speak of an absolute beginning but only of a beginning relative to the person taking the initiative to tell the story. [33] But the most fundamental experience of duration is that linked to an absolute beginning, birth, and the certainty of an end, death. Life, nestled between these two extreme points, is the foundation of a particular time, that of man, the primary characteristic of which is its being set within a limited duration.

In a very basic way, the experience of duration is perceived — through action and the interval of time between birth and death — in the activity of thinking [34] In order to answer the question *"Where are we when we think?"*, Arendt borrows a metaphor from Kafka [35]: "He" is struggling against two antagonists. One, from behind, presses him while the other prevents him from moving forward. In this struggle "He" leans against one and then against the other in order to fight. Therefore, they are three: "He" and his two antagonists. "He" dreams of escaping from the front line, and of being made judge in virtue of his experience.

This, in the eyes of Arendt, is a metaphor of *"the time sensation of the thinking ego"*. [36] Thought has therefore been set back from phenomena and has gathered its activity around itself. In this movement it brings about and makes equally present the past and the future, suddenly perceiving the struggle the "He" makes against these two antagonists.

Why is there a struggle? Very simply because the past and the future flow together towards him and are in opposition within him. "He" is actively involved in the battle and is not a spectator. It is his being part of the continuous flow of time that creates a rupture, a discontinuity in the infinite movement of the cosmos. Accordingly, this being a part of time breaks it down into *"the tenses past, present, future, whereby past and future are antagonistic to each other as the no-longer and the not-yet only because of the presence of man, who himself has an 'origin', his birth, and an end, his death, and therefore stands at any given moment between them; this in-between is called the present"*. [37]

If there is a struggle and the very activity of thinking is engaged in combat against time, this is so because *"the relentless motion that transforms all Being into Becoming,*

instead of letting it be, ... incessantly destroys its being present". [38]

The present instant in which man struggles is a "*time gap*", [39] a "*non-time space in the very heart of time*", [40] which is that "something" that endures and in which he spends his life. This prolonged present is therefore a duration in which man is present and aware of himself.

It is from this *nunc stans* — the unmoving now that transcends the infinite movement of cosmic time — that a meaning can be given to a series of any kind of events. Temporal continuity is not an effect due to the uninterrupted flow of change pure and simple. It is *brought about* by the thinking subject from the unmoving instant that is the present of his action. This is historical time. This process becomes concrete, is made real in the world of phenomena under the form of objects created for duration, that is, capable of ensuring man stability in the endless movement of the cosmos.

Duration is then the particular sign of human time. It is the result of the transcendence of the act of thinking in the uninterrupted movement of the cosmos and, in virtue of this, is the anthropological condition for the existence of a meaning. [41] Human uniqueness, from the point of view of temporality, comes about therefore because of duration, [42] the condition for the possibility of *meaning* and of *relationship* with others. This is why duration can be considered a *criterion of humanity* in acting, since action is necessarily situated in space and in cosmic time.

For its part, *durability* is the essential quality (though not the only one) of *objects-of-the-world* (in the strong sense given to this term by Arendt), independently of the activity from which they arise. They lend their stability to man and take on the twofold function of *mediation* (between men) and of *reminiscence*. [43] Without them the human condition of plurality could not be brought about. Accordingly, their value is essentially social.

CONCLUSIONS

Up to this point I have been faithful to my mentor, but here, at the threshold of eternity, she stops. And this is where I am going to leave her, here where the Christian that I am can continue forward in the light of faith.

The experience of duration and the Christian system

Although the concept of eternity is for her a limit concept that one can point to but not think about, she designates it as that towards which the profound desire of man tends. The struggle itself reveals this desire, *eros*, for "that-which-does-not-pass-away", [44] similar to that love of wisdom that prompts Socrates to engage in philosophy. The *nunc stans* points to a *nunc aeternitatis*. Christian revelation permits, in faith, to move beyond the order of philosophical intuition and to see in this unmoving instant the model and

metaphor of divine eternity.

Faith does not suspend reason. Temporality and the abyss that opens up in the present instant is a fact experienced by thought. What faith reveals is primarily the absolute beginning of the cosmos and of time rather than their end, which is no less certain. These are two facts that are beyond the human capacity of experience. [45] The affirmation of creation, that is, of an absolute beginning and of eschatology, puts an end to the infinite movement of the cosmos and encloses it within a *duration*. This acquires a meaning, no longer given by man but by God: time is history, that of the fall and of salvation; that of a God who draws near to man, who enters into a covenant with him and in Christ raises him to the intimacy of his own trinitarian life.

The second disclosure made by revelation is that of the "Who" of God, in the persons of the Son, the Holy Spirit and the Father. The *nunc stans* opens to a trinity of persons. The transcendence indicated is, from that point on, no longer silent: it becomes the place of a mutual presence, of a relationship in word and in contemplation. In this dialogue between creature and the Creator thought no longer moves itself; it is moved by God. This exchange therefore remains ineffable.

However incommunicable it may be, this relationship is no less real. One of its characteristics is its being simultaneously personal and communal. Nowhere else does the creature find a similar intimacy in listening and speaking. But the nature of its partner in dialogue, who is God, and that of his Covenant allows the creature to be put into relationship, by him, with the whole community of other people. This relationship is no longer merely what it once was of old, that of a common creation in the image of God. It is the renewal of this relationship in a living unity. A new creation in Christ, we have been given unity in the Holy Spirit, the personal leaven of the love that unites the Trinity. In other words, this relationship with God constitutes *oneness* — *in solidum* — in the person of Christ. This means that the relationship with others has in Christ one new and unexpected way of coming about. The mediation of word and act, which remain indispensable for communicating with others, now becomes twofold and melds into this mysterious communion that unites us with the Father, in an even more authentic and true way than by word and action. Arendt's condition of plurality no longer appears as a fact of nature imposed *a priori* as an anthropological premise. On the contrary, it is experienced as the constantly renewed work of our God. Indeed, as the Gospels reveal to us, he seeks to gather us into his living unity.

This relationship with others, given greater importance by Christ, is not contrary to that of word and action. It blends with the latter, completing it, intensifying it. The demands of justice that bind me to my neighbour no longer rest only on the recognition of his equal dignity but on a concern prompted by charity.

The question consequently becomes that of knowing whether, in the Christian system, the experience of temporality remains the same, particularly with regard to the criterion of duration that we emphasized previously. Anthropologically, I do not think that it has changed: duration remains that particular characteristic of the thinking subject

capable of uniting in one meaning a totality that he gathers together and brings about through the spirit. [46]

The life of Christ teaches us that the resurrection, which opens to us the way to eternity, passes through the cross. Bodily death is not eliminated. It becomes the necessary passage beyond which man crosses the veil of time to enter into divine eternity. But that is an object of our faith. The anthropological certitude of death and with it the validity of the daily experience of time is not eliminated by it.

What does change, it seems to me, is the meaning of this experience of temporality and hence the nature of our involvement in history. Christians are not more capable than other people of knowing by experience the beginning or end of time. Their life is equally a struggle against the relentless motion that transforms everything and incessantly destroys man's being present. [47] What changes is the meaning of this struggle.

When the spirit creates a duration and brings about a meaning, it must then consider the pre-existence of a total meaning. In the Christian perspective, our history is part of salvation history. Moreover, it is called to take part in the work of redemption. The radical nature of this change cannot be overemphasized. The foolishness, the absurdity from a human point of view, of the lives of so many saints constantly reminds us of this.

Temporality entails a particular grace: theological hope. Faith, theology teaches us, attains its object and involves a real participation of man in God from here below. This participation, fully brought about in the sacrament of the Eucharist remains nonetheless a mystery and subjected to the rhythms of our history. Communion in God, already a reality, is not yet fully achieved, and we journey through this world in *hope*. This is the grace of the Holy Spirit that, from the day of Pentecost, allows the Apostles to be free from all fear and to bear witness to the gift that they have received.

Hope and eternity [48] are two concepts joined together in Scripture: this is because God is faithful (he does not change), because the believer hopes in him. Certain of God's benevolence and mercy, the believer hopes for his help in time of trial. His concern for man has always been made manifest through a saving action or word. This is what the Christian hopes for, this is the coming of Christ in his eschatological kingship. [49] Hope is the theological virtue that responds to our historical condition. It characterizes the concrete involvement of the Christian and indicates that his individual history is part of salvation history.

Duration as an ethical criterion of work

The reader has perhaps grown impatient. What relation can this reflection on duration have with the question of work?

The response is now very simple and singularly fundamental: if duration is not integrated into work, work becomes inhuman. *Meaning*, significance and *relation* are

inherent in the concept of duration. That is why I think that this is one of the basic criteria for determining the human dimension of work.

But we would not be able to apply this criterion without indicating a particular duration as a point of reference. In this context, such a duration seems to me to be that of a human life: the time that separates birth from death (the period within which a person achieves what he has been through his acts and words). This is the source-duration, the only one that is absolute for men and women, and that allows for the making of an effective judgment on the person. Empirically formalized in the hope of life in the midst of a population, a *life-time* is the only measure capable of understanding and describing the person in his totality. If, then, the duration against which work must be measured is that of a *life-time*, we have a weighty argument for judging and combatting certain of its modern-day tendencies. [50]

It is particularly useful with regard to working conditions, allowing us to determine very quickly whether they are humane or, on the contrary, dehumanizing. We must immediately add, however, that since duration is determined by the subject, no working conditions could be satisfactory in themselves. The effort of thinking is needed to unify the complexity of daily activity and give it a meaning, that is, recognize in it and lend it the possibility of being human.

This, I believe, does justice to the freedom of the person. It is up to the person, and to the person alone, to imbue his activity with his humanity, to fill his person with it and mark institutions with the seal of human dignity. The person has the power to humanize his work, to make his work human, precisely insofar as circumstances permit.

From the point of view of duration, what are these circumstances? Some of them are well known. Let us use the image of Chaplin, in modern times, whose work consists in screwing two bolts into a piece that a conveyor belt constantly moves out of his reach. This is the archetype of labour *divided to the extreme*, to the point of reducing it to a mere gesture. This type of activity, although diminishing today because of automation, is the opposite of every duration: the act is so simple that it can be reduced and reproduced at a greater rhythm that alienates work from the person, making him foreign to it. It cannot be filled with the person and in no case is capable of duration.

Another type of work that does not permit duration is very short-term work. These are the countless *temporary or unstable jobs*, limited duration contracts that are linked to particular economic circumstances; in a word, all those activities where the near future is uncertain. These do not allow the establishment of any duration because their present is characterized by an uncertainty such that one cannot live within it fully. The same phenomenon is found, although to a lesser extent, when the need for flexibility in work goes beyond a reasonable limit. Experience shows that for unskilled workers, or those with few skills, this propensity to constant change is profoundly unstructuring.

These are the obstacles to conditions of material possibility for duration, but there are more subtle forms that prevent it: what I shall call *monopolistic activities*. These are all

activities that put such a great emphasis on action that they end up making it difficult or improbable to have the necessary distance to bring about a meaning in duration. On one hand, there is *tedious labour*, and on the other, the *long hours* of managerial staffs, which literally leave no energy or time for other activities. In effect, although this work is unified by action in a single duration, it is not however reflected or integrated in the source-duration, which is life as a whole. Moreover, it cannot be so reflected or integrated insofar as it monopolizes the totality of the activity of which one person is capable. It must be understood that labour, any kind of labour whatsoever, cannot fill a life without making that life lose something of its humanity. This is so because the unification brought about by action is fragile and can endure only in the short term. Legislation that does not set time limits for the duration of work is not untypical; nor is it uncommon, in countries where such limits are provided by law, for these limits to be disregarded. This tendency seems to be likewise present in the area of services, where the breakdown of work hours becomes ever more difficult. How many lawyers, businessmen, or simple employees work more than 50 or 60 hours a week under the pressure of their responsibilities?

I believe that these examples help to make clear our criterion of duration: *all work whose very nature or conditions do not permit the subject to integrate it as part of his life, in such a way that it has and maintains a meaning that is both personal and social, is dehumanizing labour.*

I would like once more to suggest, in keeping with the criterion presented, this definition, albeit incomplete, of work in the hope that it will prompt comments or critiques.

Work is the capacity of transformation that belongs to human action and that allows it to become part of time and space. This necessary and common activity shapes a world capable of bringing into the realm of durability that unstable and fragile creature that is man, enabling him to attain self-fulfillment.

ENDNOTES

[1]. This, I believe, is the primary question underlying the complex of more specific debates such as those on the division of labour, universal distribution, the reduction of work hours, etc. In this article, I shall concentrate on the criteria that permit a clarification of the particular activity of "work", but it goes without saying that this question cannot be separated from that of meaning, although I do not deal with it explicitly here.

[2]. Hannah Arendt was a Jewish German philosopher. She was born in 1906 and died in the United States in 1975 after fleeing the Nazi regime. She was a student of Jaspers and Heidegger, and is considered to be among the most illustrious representatives of the phenomenological school. Her thought, carrying the marks of the tragic events of the Second World War, concentrates basically on questions of political philosophy.

[3]. Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press,

1971).

[4]. Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1966).

[5]. "If the potential of the totalitarian world is to be sought in a meditation on radical evil, that of the non-totalitarian world is to be sought in the resources of resistance and renewal found in the human condition as such." P. Ricoeur, "Preface" in Arendt, *Condition de l'homme moderne* (Paris: 1988), 13.

[6]. Arendt's predilection for temporality owes much to Heidegger, but it is possible that the origin of the particular characteristic of her thought is to be found in her reading of Augustine and his analysis of time (Augustine's own phrases, *what no longer is* and *what is not yet*, support this position). Cf. Arendt, *Love and Saint Augustine* (Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press, 1996, "Social life"), 98-112.

[7]. Cf. Ricoeur, op. cit., 15.

[8]. This reading is also that of Ricoeur, and I base my position here on his analysis. Cf. Ricoeur, op. cit., 14-17.

[9]. *Ibid.*, 41.

[10]. Such activity can be found, negatively, in the experience of suffering, where man is reduced to privacy, to absolute solitude. Cf. Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 109-118.

[11]. See the third part of this article.

[12]. "... the things of the world have the function of stabilizing human life...", (Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 137. See also "the thing-character of the world", *ibid.*, 93-96). It is then the total sum of created objects, fashioned by man, that form the environment in which he lives. That is the place where man sets himself up, where he makes his dwelling, the only homeland that is his under the heavens (*seine Heimat*).

The *objects-of-the-world*, despite their diversity, all share a quality that is immanent with regard to their finality: durability. The permanence that man has given to these objects in fashioning them makes them a part of his world. They are therefore not destined to consumption but to use: they are "*things that are not consumed but used, and to which, as we use them, we become used and accustomed. As such, they give rise to the familiarity of the world, its customs and habits of intercourse between men and things as well as between men and men*" (*ibid.*, 94).

Some of these objects, however, also have another property, linked to their status as *object-of-thought*: that of reminiscence. Thought in its perpetual movement is firmly set within them in one of its specific moments. The function of these objects, then, is that of bringing this thought to mind and making it visible so that it is apparent to other men. In

order to do this, action, speech and thought have had to pay the price of being "reified", being made into things, where they lose their *spirit* in order to gain the permanence of the *letter* (cf. *ibid.*, 95).

[13]. We take up in a different way the thought expressed by Hans Jonas in the principle of responsibility. The relationship of force, till now dominated by nature, has been reversed in the technological era to the advantage of man and human artifacts. It now falls to man to be vigilant so that his activity does not make nature disappear. Cf. H. Jonas, *Le principe responsabilité, une éthique pour la civilisation technologique* (Paris: 1990).

[14]. Reduced to a mass of individuals, an entire society can be manipulated. This is precisely what happened in Germany under Hitler.

[15]. Ricoeur, *op. cit.*, 19.

[16]. The *animal laborans* exists outside the world. He "*does not flee the world but is ejected from it insofar as he is imprisoned in the privacy of his own body, caught in the fulfillment of needs in which nobody can share and which nobody can fully communicate*", Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 118-119.

[17]. The disturbing accumulation of goods and capital in our industrialized societies is the incidental consequence of a largely institutionalized consumption. But it only conceals the process of production and consumption that is its point of reference and that gives it meaning.

[18]. Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 96.

[19]. The fundamental question that Hannah Arendt must face at this point is the following: does utility govern the totality of the objects that make up the world? Does utility have a meaning? Or, more basically, of what use is utility? (Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 154).

According to the consistent utilitarianism of *homo faber*, no work is an end in itself but, once completed, it serves as a means for a new process of production. This unending chain can tolerate no break, other than that imposed by man in determining those works that will be an end in themselves, which can then no longer be used in turn as a means. Nonetheless, in the sphere of meaning of *homo faber*, where works lose their quality as an end once they are completed, that is a contradiction.

Now, no meaning can be attached to an end that is not permanent and does not maintain its character as an end, whether it is a human achievement or simply found by man (cf. *ibid.*, 154-155). Insofar as *homo faber* "*is nothing but a fabricator and thinks in no terms but those of means and ends which arise directly out of his work activity, is just as incapable of understanding meaning as the animal laborans is incapable of understanding instrumentality*" (*ibid.*). The meaning of this world, which is a fact beyond the access of *homo faber*, becomes for him a paradoxical "end in itself" (*ibid.*, 156).

The paradox generally arises in passing from utility to utilizer, from object to subject, in setting up man as the final end. However, the immediate consequence of this anthropocentrism is to strip the world and the works that make it up of their intrinsic value and reduce them to the level of pure means. The paradox is the following: only fabrication and its instrumentality are capable of building a world, but utility is incapable of being the meaning of the world.

This paradox cannot be raised without moving to the third sphere of meaning, that of action. But an analysis of the *objects-of-the-world* already permits us to draw the conclusion that utility does not govern all such objects. There are some which, while they are eminently *of-the-world*, like works of art, are strictly without any utility (*ibid.*, 167). These are objects that are expressly created to reveal and communicate thought, so that their durability should prompt the memory of thought: "*The man-made world of things ... becomes a home for mortal men ... only inasmuch as it transcends both the sheer functionalism of things produced for consumption and the sheer utility of objects produced for use.*" Likewise, it integrates "*life in its non-biological sense ... that manifests itself in action and speech, both of which share with life its essential futurity*" (*ibid.*, 173).

[20]. This durability is not absolute. Work does not escape decay, but this deterioration is incidental to use, whereas it is inherent in consumption.

[21]. *Ibid.*, 136.

[22]. *Ibid.*, 140-143. Arendt illustrates her point by contemplating the Platonian concept of ideas. But in a note she says that no theory has provided a satisfactory account of the pre-existing experience from idea to realization. Moreover, she makes no mention of this in *The Life of the Mind*.

[23]. *Ibid.*, 176.

[24]. *Ibid.*, 178. "*Human plurality ... has the twofold character of equality and distinction. If men were not equal, they could neither understand each other and those who came before them, nor plan for the future and foresee the needs of those who will come after them*" (*ibid.*, 175). This is not just a question of human sociality. Properly speaking, it is a condition of human life that makes this life fully human, before the individual subject appears, who receives himself and recognizes himself in it. See also Arendt, *The Life of the Mind. Thinking* (New York and London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., 1977), 179-193.

[25]. Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 179.

[26]. *Ibid.*, 180.

[27]. This is above all a philosophical approach to reality (starting from the conscience, the act of thought in the world) that disturbs the reader accustomed in this area to the empirical methods of the human sciences. The most serious criticism is made against the way she

uses other authors, citing their works but forcing the meaning — sometimes to the limits of intellectual honesty — by fitting it to her way of thinking (particularly with Marx).

[28]. Fabrication — in the eyes of Arendt, the only transformation of nature that makes a contribution to the world — appears inextricably linked to the existence of specialized communities, where artisanship can meet common needs. She excludes almost straightaway our modern societies that integrate huge populations requiring industrial processes to satisfy the people's needs. In this case, it seems like her analysis could not be applied to many points of view.

[29]. It will be remembered that she distinguishes product and work in affirming that durability is merely incidental in the first case while it is essential in the second. In fact, she is well aware of the difficulty here and tries to resolve it, but in my opinion unsuccessfully. Cf. *ibid.*, 144-153.

[30]. Following the example of Jean-Yves Calvez, I would like to take up again this criterion of the *necessity* of labour as expounded by Arendt, but purged of its negative character of alienation, of non-meaning linked to a particular instant, of a product entirely determined by and for consumption. It seems to me that labour responds primarily, but not solely, to the needs of survival in an *environment* that puts up a *resistance* (whether nature or human conniving) to man, requiring from him considerable *time* and *effort* to procure for himself those goods that are necessary for a life worthy of man. The great variety of these goods and the spiritual nature of some of them, as well as man's relational nature, reject as utopian any affirmation of an end to labour. Cf. J.-Y. Calvez, *Nécessité du travail* (Paris: 1997); also D. Méda, *Le travail, une valeur en voie de disparition* (Paris: 1995), for an interpretation of the end of labour.

[31]. Arendt, *The Life of the Mind. Thinking*, 202-213.

[32]. *Ibid.*, 197 ff.

[33]. This is the recurring problem of all human science that must put into sequence or isolate facts in order to analyze them. For the concept of narrativity that I refer to here, see Ricoeur, *Soi-même comme un autre* (Paris: 1990), 167-198. (*One's self as another*. The self and narrative identity.)

[34]. Arendt uses an approach to thought that she traces to Socrates: it is an activity that is innate and indispensable for the life of the person, in order that the person may be fully human. Its discursive movement is fundamentally inconclusive and open. It is an activity spurred on by a love (*eros*) of wisdom, a wisdom, however, that it will never come to possess. Cf. Arendt, *The Life of the Mind. Thinking*, 166-193.

[35]. "He has two antagonists; the first presses him from behind, from his origin. The second blocks the road in front of him. He gives battle to both. Actually, the first supports him in his fight with the second, for he wants to push him forward, and in the same way the second supports him in his fight with the first, since he drives him back. But it is only

theoretically so. For it is not only the two antagonists who are there, but he himself as well, and who really knows his intentions? His dream, though, is that some time in an unguarded moment -and this, it must be admitted, would require a night darker than any night has ever been yet- he will jump out of the fighting line and be promoted, on account of his experience in fighting, to the position of umpire over his antagonists in their fight with each other." (F. Kafka, *Gesammelte Schriften, Description of a battle* (New York: 1946, vol. V), p. 287; cited in Arendt, *The Life of the Mind. Thinking*, 202).

[36]. Arendt, *The Life of the Mind. Thinking*, 202.

[37]. *Ibid.*, 203.

[38]. *Ibid.*, 206.

[39]. *Ibid.*, 207.

[40]. *Ibid.*, 210.

[41]. Meaning can only be attached to a duration, something limited and not infinite, because man himself is limited.

[42]. We must note moreover that the source-duration is that of the life of a man. It is within this interval of 60 to 80 years given to an individual to live that all other durations take place for him. It is likewise man who will be the ultimate measure of these durations. Unlike cosmic time, there is no universal measure of this human time. It is, on the contrary, unique for each individual. The only real constant is that of duration.

[43]. The capacity of *objects-of-thought* (music, poetry, painting, language, etc.) to bring memory to thought. Objects of this particular type are like a frozen thought, reified, that can be transmitted to others only in this fashion.

[44]. This is not the simple desire for immortality but rather for eternity.

[45]. For man, the past has an end, the present moment, but no beginning. In like manner, the future has a point of origin, but no end. These are then, from the person's point of view, two infinities.

[46]. One could also include under this aspect the account of *Genesis* where Adam *assigns names*, that is, he gives a meaning to everything that preceded him.

[47]. Cf. Arendt, *The Life of the Mind. Thinking*, 206.

[48]. "*The Hebrew word 'ôlam (variously translated as century, eternity, world, etc.) designates a duration that surpasses human measure: God lives 'for ever', from 'age to age'*", VTB, 1274. This applies to God: (1) in the order of creation: it is he who makes solid all that on the earth possesses some kind of stability in the physical or moral order (cf.

Ps 119:89, 112:3-6, 65:7); (2) in the account of the Covenant that unites him to Israel and then to the Church, he reveals himself as the One whose promise is sure and who remains faithful; that is why it is said that his word, his design, his promise, his kingdom, his justice, his love endure for ever (cf. *Is* 14:24, 40:8; *Dan* 4:31; *Ps* 111:3; *Rom* 4:16 ff.); (3) lastly, the people of God possess, in the Son, by faith, eternal life (cf. *Jn* 3:15, 6:54, 17:3); the Church proclaims him as the Living One, the One "who was and is and is to come" (*Rev* 4:8; cf. *Heb* 13:8).

[49]. *"But our commonwealth is in heaven, and from it we await a Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will change our lowly body to be like his glorious body, by the power which enables him even to subject all things to himself"* (*Phil* 3:20). Therefore hope is defined as the theological virtue that, by the working of the Spirit, ensures the attainment of eschatological goods and provides the courage to move towards achieving them personally and socially, in history and beyond history.

[50]. Here I set aside the question of the life of a culture, which greatly surpasses that of an individual. But even for Jonas, the ethical criterion of preserving the conditions of life for future generations refers to concrete persons. This is likewise what I read in Christian social teaching regarding the subordination of individuals to the common good and of the common good to the good of persons.