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Identity and Victimhood

The question of identity is somewhat foreign to the tradition of psychoanalysis initiated by Freud and Lacan, especially if we distinguish identity from identification. Work in this tradition is based on the subject in its dependence on the signifier. From the beginning of his teachings, Lacan tried to steer the notion of subject away from any conflation with the psychology of the individual. Thus, he would define the subject of the unconscious as ‘transindividual,’¹ that is, as the effect of the transmission of a multiplicity of ‘concrete discourses’ – including those from previous generations – that makes the Other an essential part of the subject. The presence of this multiplicity, of the ‘plurality’ that is inherent in the structure of the subject brings to mind some aspects of Hannah Arendt's thinking in *The Human Condition*. In this work, in which she develops the problematics of identity and difference in close connection with the activities of acting and speaking within the polis, I find some interesting resonances with the field of psychoanalysis, resonances I propose to highlight.

¹ Lacan, Jacques, "The Function and Field of Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis" (1953), in *Écrits* [1966; New York, W.W. Norton, 2006, trans. Bruce Fink].

Interestingly for a psychoanalyst, hers is a reflection on our human condition in explicit contradistinction to a definition of human nature: *“The problem of human nature...seems unanswerable in both its individual psychological sense and its general philosophical sense.”*²

Turning her reflection away from any form of essentialism, she approaches the question of the human condition through the term *Vita Activa*, which comprises three fundamental activities: labor, work, and action and speech, by far the most consequential of the conditions, since it is related to the reality of human plurality. Action and speech is the condition of all political life. Furthermore, it is only in within this domain that the question of someone’s identity can be raised, as she notes: *“Action and speech are so closely related because the primordial and specifically human act always also answers the question asked of every newcomer: ‘Who are you?’”*³

Human plurality is characterized by both *equality and distinction*. The presence of others with whom we share a symbolic register implies that one’s own unique individual trait of identity is necessarily intertwined with a trait of ~~otherness and~~ alterity. As she notes, *“In man, otherness and distinctiveness becomes uniqueness, and what man inserts with word and deed into the company of his own kind is uniqueness.”*⁴ It is only on the grounds of their speech and

² Arendt, Hannah. *The Human Condition*. Chicago, 1958, The University of Chicago Press.

³ Arendt, Hannah. “Labor, Work, Action” (1964), in *The Portable Hannah Arendt*, p. 179.

⁴ Arendt, Hannah. “Labor, work, Action,” p. 179.

action within a plurality that human subjects “*actively reveal their unique personal identities and thus make their appearance in the human world...*”⁵

But unlike a supposedly self-assumed identity, this disclosure does not correspond to an intentional act on the part of the subject. On the contrary, the ‘who’ that we disclose within the bounds of our speaking and acting remains largely unknown and hidden from us. This revelation, which retains its quality of surprise for the subject himself, resembles the punctual moments in which truth, speaking unwittingly through one’s own mouth, emerges.

Moreover, she posits that the domain of action and speech is also the potential ground for new beginnings, where to act is basically to take an initiative, to set something in motion, comparable to the moments in which a subject’s speech might take the form of an act. In acting and speaking within the polis, a subject may initiate and set something in motion, without necessarily being the master of his or her own act. In so doing, she or he becomes *subject in the twofold senses of the word, namely its actor and sufferer*⁶ (184).

This vision of the subject as both actor and sufferer, subjected to symbolic determinants that escape him, yet capable of producing an act of choice, is congruent with the notion of the subject in analysis, whose hypothesis is the wager of the analyst. The subject is both the effect of the articulation of signifiers, and also the subject as the *hypokeimenon*, the hypothesis subsisting beneath the act that engenders it.

⁵ Arendt, Hannah. *The Human Condition*, p. 179.

⁶ Arendt, Hannah, *ibid.*, p. 184.

These two senses of the term are present in the way psychoanalysis approaches the question of the subject and the ethics proper to it: on the one hand, the subject is subjected and determined by the chain of signifiers; on the other, it is also the latent presence that is supposed to ex-sist underneath the operations that articulate the unconscious as knowledge. In this latter sense, the subject is the agent who, embarking in the direction of his or her desire and enjoyment, brings about a measure of freedom and choice that is not absolute, but that nonetheless implies the responsibility and the ethical dimension of his or her act.

I believe that this tension between the subject's subjection to a set of determinants (pre-individual discourses, familial and political circumstances, etc.) on the one hand, and a measure of choice and freedom on the other hand, that is always necessary to suppose for the speaking being, is also present in Arendt's articulation. Indeed, she contests the approaches to freedom that comes from philosophical tradition — in which freedom is automatically identified with a sovereign subject— and instead proposes that, in domain of the polis, there is a simultaneous presence of “freedom and non-sovereignty”: *“No man can be sovereign because not one man but men inhabit the earth.”*⁷

This perspective, which supposes a combination of freedom and non-sovereignty in the scope of the subject's conduct within the polis, limits the illusion of an individual with ‘free will,’ without losing sight of the issue of the subject's responsibility vis-à-vis the consequences of his acts. It is also a perspective reminiscent of the inherent tension between the operations of

⁷ Ardent, Hannah. *The Human Condition*, p. 234.

alienation and separation governing the birth of the subject. Within this logic, which displays the articulation between the subject and the Other, the subject's choice of the movement of de-alienation implies a 'leap' (not without its risks) into subjectivity and the responsibility that ensues. Lacan would note that as the result of this process – via the juridical sense included in the etymology of the term '*parere*' (to procure) – a subject can procure for himself a "civil status."⁸

Two important events however, lower the scope and political relevance of the domain of action and speech: the extension of the predominance of science, and the advent of automation.

Though automation appears at first to liberate mankind from the toils of labor, it also create a new type of bondage by unleashing and expanding labor and market forces to an unprecedented degree. This expansion means that utility is established as the ultimate standard for life and the world of men. Ultimately this 'glorification of labor and the victory of the *animal laborans*'⁹ signifies that human preoccupation turns away from the affairs of the world and political action – and the responsibilities that come from it – and becomes utterly

⁸ "*Parere*" was first of all to procure (a child for one's husband). This is why the subject can procure for himself what interests him here – a status I will qualify as "civil." Lacan, Jaques. "Position of the Unconscious" (1964), *Écrits*.

⁹ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, p. 347.

submerged in the processes of production and consumption and the behaviors that reproduce them. Ultimately, the victory of labor for the purpose of consumption signifies that “*behavior has replaced action and speaking as the foremost mode of human relation.*”¹⁰

In line with this decline in the scope and relevance of action and speech within the affairs of the polis, I would say that one of the problematic effects in the proliferation of the discourses on identity is the increasing sense of victimhood and focus on grievances that tends to accompany claims of identity. These effects are very apparent especially within the so-called ‘psychological’ disciplines, which, relying on diagnostic types, confuse the subject with an identifiable ‘consistency’ (a subject is traumatized, depressed, hyperactive, etc.) These practices not only neglect the role of speech in inducing effects of subjectivity; they have recourse to a notion of trauma that, corresponding to factual truth, completely ignores the role of the phantasm and jouissance in the causation of the symptom. One should denounce the complicity of these disciplines with the promotion of “science as the ideology of the suppression of the subject” (Lacan, 1970).¹¹

But the effects of grievances and the increasing identification with victimhood that at times comes associated with claims of identity, is also palpable within the socially similar. In this regard I would just mention a political movement initiated in the 70’s in the USA, called the “Victims’ Rights Movement,” a profoundly conservative and reactionary movement that was

¹⁰ Arendt, Hannah. *The Human Condition*, p. 41.

¹¹ Lacan, Jacques. "Radiophonie" (1970) in *Autres écrits*, Paris, Éditions du Seuil, 2001, p. 437.

born out of concerns that the justice system was 'soft on crime.'¹ As a result of this movement – “the child of an unlikely marriage of conservatism and feminism,”¹² as an author noted ironically —, changes were introduced into the legal system that are not only uprooting progressive and liberal jurisprudence; it is also responsible for introducing tougher sentences to defendants, including the application of the death penalty.

¹² Lepore, Jill. “Sirens in the Night: How the Victims’ Rights Revolution Has Remade American Justice,” *The New Yorker*, May 21, 2018.