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POLITICS AND PRODUCTS: AN ARENDTIAN ANALYSIS OF MODERN HUMANS'
CONCERN FOR IMMORTALITY

by

GUNNAR FOOTH

Under the Direction of Eric Wilson, PhD

ABSTRACT

In her book *The Human Condition*, philosopher Hannah Arendt analyzes how political theory and activity in Western, industrialized societies have changed significantly since the time of the ancient Greeks and Romans. One interesting claim that Arendt makes is that humans in the modern age have lost an “authentic concern for immortality.” The purpose of this essay is to articulate what an authentic, Arendtian concern for immortality is, and to defend her claim that humans in the modern age lack such a concern. By utilizing Jean Baudrillard’s analysis of modern consumerism and social psychology, I defend Arendt’s claim that modern humans do in fact lack such an authentic concern. Finally, I conclude the essay by responding to what I take to be three possible objections to my argument and show that they ultimately fail.

INDEX WORDS: Arendt, Politics, Consumerism, Capitalism, Immortality

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by

GUNNAR FOOTH

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Georgia State University

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CONCERN FOR IMMORTALITY

by

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this project to the woman whose philosophy has made this thesis possible, Hannah Arendt. For it was Arendt's genius that inspired me to reflect on the nature of contemporary politics and interrogate our current political practices. Without her contributions to the world of philosophy, this thesis would not have been written.

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1 INTRODUCTION

The philosophical concepts of immortality and eternity, far from being mere theological devices, have come to form the backbone of various philosophical systems, from Platonism to Transhumanism, from the fields of politics to ethics. In the history of philosophy, both concepts also play an integral role in the work of Hannah Arendt. In her book *The Human Condition*, by focusing on both the metaphysical concept of eternity and humans' concern with achieving immortality, Arendt analyzes how the production and consumption of goods have influenced the development of the economic, social, and political aspects of human life. According to Arendt, humans' preoccupation with the metaphysical concept of eternity and their concern with achieving an immortal life were the primary driving forces for the development of ancient Greek life and politics.¹ The seeds of these concepts can still be found in contemporary Western political thought, but, according to Arendt, these concepts play a much less formative role in politics and social life than they did during the time of the ancient Greeks.

One notable claim that Arendt makes in *The Human Condition* is that humans in the modern age no longer possess an "authentic concern for immortality."² This implies that, for Arendt, the concern that modern society has for immortality now differs in some significant way from the concern the ancient Greeks and Romans had for immortality. Unfortunately, Arendt does not give an explicit account of what constitutes an authentic concern for immortality, although this concept of authenticity also shows up in her other philosophical works.³

¹ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 232. In support of Arendt's claim, philosopher A. G. Long in his book *Death and Immortality in Ancient Philosophy* provides a contemporary analysis of Aristotle's discussion of immortality's relation to political life, great words and deeds, and leaving behind a lasting legacy after one's death.

² *Ibid.*, 55.

³ See, for example, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* and "What Is Authority?" in *Between Past and Future*.

The purpose of this essay is to articulate what an authentic, Arendtian concern for immortality is, and to defend her claim that humans in the modern age lack such a concern. My first task will be providing an account of what characterizes an Arendtian, authentic concern for immortality, after which I will deduce the primary features of an inauthentic concern. This project will be illuminating for determining Arendt's notion of authenticity in both *The Human Condition* as well as her other political works.

First I argue that, according to Arendt, an authentic concern for immortality has three requirements: (1) it employs a particular *political* concept of immortality that is associated with legacy, in contrast to the modern biological or theological conceptions of immortality; (2) it appraises, develops, and utilizes the human artifice, or what Arendt calls "the world," primarily according to leaving behind an everlasting legacy; and (3) it possesses an implicit trust that the human artifice will outlive the hands of its mortal makers. Second, relying in part on Jean Baudrillard's analysis of modern consumerism, I defend Arendt's claim that modern humans do in fact lack such an authentic concern. Finally, I conclude the essay by responding to what I take to be three possible objections to my argument and show that they ultimately fail.

2 IMMORTALITY (AND PARADISE?) LOST

2.1 The Question of Modernity

To begin, the terms “modernity,” “modern age,” and “modern world” show up in Arendt’s work, and, though such terms in philosophical works are usually ambiguous, it should be noted at the outset that they refer to fairly precise time periods in Arendt’s philosophy. For Arendt, the “modern age” began in the “seventeenth century [and] came to an end at the beginning of the twentieth century.”⁴ Arendt contrasts this time with the “modern world” which “was born with the first atomic explosions.”⁵ In this essay, discussions of the modern age will refer primarily to the development and characteristics of Western, capitalistic, industrialized societies since the 17th century, and discussions about the modern world will refer primarily to the development and characteristics of these societies post-1945. (For Arendt, the characteristics of modern political life and human psychology that interest her in *The Human Condition* persist into what some contemporary theorists dub “postmodernity.” For the purposes of her social theory, postmodernity is not a time period separate or in opposition to modernity, but one that is encapsulated *within* the time period of modernity. As such, I will not distinguish between modernity and postmodernity in this essay.)

2.2 Arendt’s Analysis of the Threefold *Vita Activa*

Arendt begins her analysis of humans’ changing concern with immortality by tracing the development of politics from the ancient Greeks and Romans through the end of the modern era, roughly from the time of Plato and Aristotle through the 20th century. Integral to Arendt’s account

⁴ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 6.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 6.

of ancient Greek and Roman politics — and, thus, her account of *contemporary* politics and society — is her distinction between the three different types of activities that humans engage in that condition their existence: labor, work, and action.⁶ These activities, according to Arendt, correspond to the basic conditions under which humans are born, live, and die, and a central theme of *The Human Condition* is how these fundamental activities are related to how humans interact with one another and their environment, produce goods, and construct the society in which they live.⁷

The first of these activities is labor, which corresponds to the “biological process of the human body.”⁸ All activities directly associated with the necessities of life (e.g. breathing, eating, digestion, reproduction, growth, decay, etc.) constitute labor.⁹ For Arendt, “the human condition of labor is life itself” — labor is life-sustaining activity, an integral part of the life-cycle which constitutes the conditions under which all organisms on earth persist and reproduce.¹⁰ No organism, not even humans, can escape engaging in labor for their continued existence.

Work is the second activity Arendt discusses, which “provides an ‘artificial’ world of things, distinctly different from all natural surroundings.”¹¹ All activities associated with producing objects and artifacts which are not necessarily “imbedded in ... the species’ ever-recurring life cycle” (e.g. the production of goods, tools, art, and activities like carpentry, craft-making, etc.) constitute work.¹² In contrast to labor, work is distinct to those organisms which create or produce goods that are not necessary for mere survival, and it corresponds to “the unnaturalness of human existence,” culminating in humans’ active attempts to produce things

⁶ Ibid., 80, 136, 188.

⁷ Ibid., 177.

⁸ Ibid., 7.

⁹ Ibid., 79. Labor for Arendt is not necessarily a conscious or intentional activity.

¹⁰ Ibid., 7, 80.

¹¹ Ibid., 7.

¹² Ibid., 7.

which “outlast and transcend” the cyclical and transitory nature of life.¹³ Thus, work is the activity that corresponds to the human condition of “worldliness,” whose aim is to provide a stable physical environment for earthly life and allow for the emergence of politics.¹⁴

Action is the third fundamental Arendtian activity, the “only activity that goes on directly between men without the intermediary of things or matter.”¹⁵ For Arendt, action is the activity that corresponds to the “human condition of plurality,” which is “*the* condition ... of all political life” — the fact that each and every human that has existed, does exist, and will exist is unique with respect to their physical and psychological constitution, aims, and life practices.¹⁶ While labor is performed for continued life, and work to “bestow a measure of permanence and durability” on the transitory nature of life, action is performed for “founding and preserving political bodies,” as well as creating the “condition for remembrance, ... [or] history.”¹⁷ Action is the activity by which humans primarily express and individuate themselves and achieve glory on earth.

For Arendt, it is in these ways that all humans are connected, make sense of, and operate within the world around them, though no one human nature comprised of certain essential characteristics can be enumerated.¹⁸ Thus, according to Arendt, living a life that strikes a delicate balance among these three activities is required for personal fulfillment and satisfaction, regardless of the time period and in spite of how such activities have been analyzed and privileged by ancient and modern political philosophers.¹⁹

¹³ Ibid., 7, 138.

¹⁴ Ibid., 7, 136-137.

¹⁵ Ibid., 7.

¹⁶ Ibid., 7-8, 175.

¹⁷ Ibid., 8-9.

¹⁸ Ibid., 10.

¹⁹ Ibid., 133-134. Concerning modern society, in which there is no longer a definite distinction between the public and private realms, Arendt says, “The rather uncomfortable truth of the matter is that the triumph of the modern world has achieved over necessity is due to the emancipation of labor, that is, to the fact that the *animal laborans* was permitted to occupy the public realm; and yet, as long as the animal laborans remains in possession of it, there can be no true public realm, but only private activities displayed in the open. The outcome is what is euphemistically called mass

2.3 The Two Spheres of Ancient Greek and Roman Life and the Dissolution of the Public and Private Realms

Arendt claims that these distinct activities structured ancient Greek life and politics in important ways. Ancient Greek political life depended critically on the inherent split between the two spatially and conceptually separated spheres of any Greek individual's life, between "what is his own (*idion*) and what is communal (*koinon*)."²⁰ What was a man's own — his household, slaves, and the activities he and his household engaged in (e.g. labor and work — those activities "related to the maintenance of life") — lay in the private sphere, whereas what was communal — political participation and engagement in the *polis* — lay in the public sphere.²¹ Arendt argues that this split was to the Greeks "a division upon which all ancient political thought rested."²² The dissolution of both the spatial and conceptual boundaries between these two realms is Arendt's main focus in *The Human Condition*, and it provides us with our first clue as to the extent to which the notions of immortality and eternity have changed since ancient times.

For Arendt, two of the driving forces responsible for the formation of the Roman empire and the Greek *polis*, and their continued existence through engagement in the nonviolent life of political action within the *polis*, were these ancient peoples' attempts at achieving immortality as well as their interest in the metaphysical concept of eternity.²³ These notions can be traced back to the Greek distinction between the life of action and engagement with the world (i.e. *vita activa*)

culture, and its deep-rooted trouble is a universal unhappiness, due on one side to the troubled balance between laboring and consumption and, on the other, to the persistent demands of the animal laborans to obtain a happiness which can be achieved only where life's processes of exhaustion and regeneration, of pain and release from pain, strike a perfect balance" (134).

²⁰ Ibid., 24.

²¹ Ibid., 26. The use of the masculine pronoun here echoes the Aristotelian presumption that, historically, only *men* could be citizens of the *polis*. Though Arendt and I use the Aristotelian language, we do not believe that only men can be (or are) citizens.

²² Ibid., 28.

²³ Ibid., 17-18.

and the philosopher's life, the life of contemplation of the eternal truths of the universe (i.e. *vita contemplativa*).²⁴ In their own ways, both ways of life came to form the foundation of Greek and Roman society. The *vita activa* was concerned with achieving some sort of metaphorical immortality through the legacy one leaves behind via their actions (*praxis*) and speech (*lexis*) in the public sphere, which possesses a kind of durability and permanence unknown to the individual mortal's life: "By [political humans'] capacity for the immortal deed ... men ... attain an immortality of their own and prove themselves to be of a 'divine' nature."²⁵ In contrast, the *vita contemplativa* was concerned with experiencing the eternal truths of the universe through contemplation (*theoria*), the most sublime of human experiences, which could "occur only outside the realm of human affairs," in metaphorical stillness and quiet.²⁶ It is a way of life that, for Arendt, has "no correspondence with and [cannot] be transformed into any activity whatsoever."²⁷

Eventually, Greek life came to privilege the *vita contemplativa* over and above the *vita activa*. According to Arendt, this privileging resulted from two realizations: (1) that the *vita contemplativa* required a successful *vita activa*, and (2) "that no work of human hands [could] equal in beauty and truth the physical kosmos, which swings in itself in changeless eternity without any interference or assistance from outside, from man or god."²⁸ Both ways of life, however, remained integral for the functioning of Greek society.

Nevertheless, the efficacy of these notions in forming and sustaining political life, as well as the separation of the public and private realms did not last. Arendt hypothesizes that philosophers' "discovery of the eternal" in their observation of the cosmos, the fall of the Roman

²⁴ For the purpose of this essay, I will focus mostly on ancient *Greek* society, politics, and ways of life, the same focus of Arendt's analysis in *The Human Condition*. But Arendt also discusses Roman society similarly and in other works such as "What Is Authority?"

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 19.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 20.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 20.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 15.

empire, and the rise of the Christianity contributed to the dissolution of the public and private realms.²⁹ These developments, Arendt argues, may have caused humans in general to “look down upon all striving for immortality as vainglory” on account of the realization that “no work of moral hands can be [ultimately] immortal.”³⁰ These psychological shifts in human thought had an enormous influence on society and the development of political life in the modern world.

For Arendt, these influences culminated in the unfortunate consequence of the dissolution of the boundaries between the public and private realms and their absorption into a new rising third realm, the social realm: “The disappearance of the gulf that the ancients had to cross daily to transcend the narrow realm of the household [i.e. the private realm] and ‘rise’ into the realm of politics [i.e. the public realm] is an essentially modern phenomenon.”³¹ The primary cause of this dissolution is the particular nature of humans’ concern for achieving an immortal life, which, Arendt claims, has changed drastically since the time of the ancient Greeks: “There is perhaps no clearer testimony to the loss of the public realm in the modern age than the almost complete loss of authentic concern with immortality, a loss somewhat overshadowed by the simultaneous loss of the metaphysical concern with eternity.”³²

²⁹ Ibid., 21.

³⁰ Ibid., 21.

³¹ Ibid., 33. The scalar disappearance of this gulf has primarily progressed since the 17th century.

³² Ibid., 55.

3 THREE CHARACTERISTICS OF AN AUTHENTIC CONCERN FOR IMMORTALITY

It might be tempting to reject Arendt's claim given that she does not provide an explicit account of what constitutes an authentic concern for immortality, but I believe that the requirements necessary for possessing an authentic concern can be abstracted from Arendt's analysis of ancient political life, work, and the structure of the Greek *polis*.

In this section, I argue that an authentic, Arendtian concern for immortality has at least the following three requirements: (1) a particular political concept of immortality associated with legacy, (2) appraising, developing, and utilizing the human artifice primarily according to its ancient Greek and Roman use, and (3) trusting that the human artifice will outlive the hands of its mortal makers. These requirements will be explained in more detail below, but, as we will see, the second requirement is especially important, which demands that humans conceptualize the human artifice as performing a particular political function, developing the human artifice with this aim in mind, and then actually using the human artifice in service to this political aim.

3.1 A Particular Political Conception of Immortality

First, an authentic concern for immortality requires the proper *concept* of immortality. The political conception of immortality of the ancient Greeks and Romans is *not* the same theological or biological conception of immortality that comes to mind in contemporary Western society. The modern theological conception of immortality includes partaking in an infinite, bodiless life in some extraterrestrial spiritual realm, and the modern biological conception includes extending one's biological life indefinitely. But these notions of immortality are decidedly more literal than the conception utilized by the ancient Greeks. The political conception of the ancient Greeks is

decidedly more *metaphorical*, its nature being determined by the legacy one leaves behind after death. Arendt says,

The task and potential greatness of mortals lie in their ability to produce things — works and deeds and words — which would deserve to be and, at least to a degree, are at home in everlastingness, so that through them mortals could find their place in a cosmos where everything is immortal except themselves. By their capacity for the immortal deed, by their ability to leave non-perishable traces behind, men, their individual mortality notwithstanding, attain an immortality of their own and prove themselves to be of a ‘divine’ nature.³³

Provided that political individuals engage in sufficiently memorable instances of speech and action, they will live on in the annals of history and in the hearts and minds of present and future generations. Thus, an authentic concern for immortality requires precisely this kind of conception that harbors a concern for worldly things and endeavors; namely, the speaking of great words, and performance of great deeds.

3.2 Appraising, Developing, and Utilizing a Stable and Durable Human Artifice

Second, in addition to a political conception of immortality, a concern that is authentic requires appraising, developing, and utilizing the human artifice primarily in accordance with achieving this brand of immortality. This second requirement is intimately tied up with the activity of work, which must have certain features in order to provide for the emergence of political life.

According to Arendt, work is the activity responsible for building and maintaining the physical environment and artifacts necessary for the emergence of political life.³⁴ It is the “process by which [humans] transform nature into the human artifice which constitutes the physical world within which political life occurs.”³⁵ Without the activity of work, which produces the architecture that houses political activity and provides the tools necessary for historicization (e.g. writing

³³ Ibid., 19.

³⁴ Norris, “Hannah Arendt & Jean Baudrillard: Pedagogy in the Consumer Society,” 464.

³⁵ Ibid., 464.

instruments, furniture, books, etc.), the political realm would not exist, and both recorded history and leaving behind an immortal legacy would be impossible. Thus, for Arendt, even though the political realm is logically distinct from the activity of work, the existence of a political realm is dependent on a pre-existing human artifice.³⁶

However, in order for work to allow for the emergence of the public realm and, therefore, political life, the artifacts that are produced from work must be durable and longer-lasting than human lifespans. Unlike the items produced and immediately consumed by *animal laborans* (e.g. food), which, being stuck in the cyclical biological life process, come into and go out of existence quickly, the artifacts produced by *homo faber* (e.g. tables, chairs, etc.), which are outside of the cyclical biological life process, are meant to be *used* by humans, and so they are designed to have a more durable constitution.³⁷ Therefore, one key difference between the products of labor and the products of work are that the latter are intended to last much longer and provide a stable physical world that allows for the emergence of political life.

In addition to making the life of *animal laborans* easier and providing the stable environment required for politics, the realm of work³⁸ also serves to mediate the interactions between humans, allowing them to relate to one another in important ways.³⁹ For Arendt, the

³⁶ Some have interpreted this claim as implying that, for Arendt, the existence of politics requires slavery, or at least a working class of noncitizens. See, for example, Canovan (1974) or Pitkin (1981). However, I do not think Arendt's claim that political action depends on an already-established human artifice entails such a requirement. Nevertheless, I will not focus on responding to this claim, because it lies outside of the scope of this project.

³⁷ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 136. *Animal laborans* translates to "laboring animal," and *homo faber* translates to "fabricating human." These descriptions pick out the unique and fundamental activities of labor and work, respectively: "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" (136).

³⁸ For the purposes of this essay, I will use the phrases 'realm of work,' 'human artifice,' and 'products of work' interchangeably, since here they all serve the same conceptual and functional role.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 87. There is a sense in which food may serve a similar role, since the cultural practice of sharing a meal also serves to mediate the interactions of humans. But food cannot do the work required of the projects of *homo faber* according to Arendt's social theory. For example, the taste of food is inherently subjective and relative to each individual perceiver, whereas the nature of the thing produced through work is objective and, in a sense, exists independently of subjective perception and understanding. In addition, food is not constitutive of the human artifice,

products of work are what provide the grounds for shared existence with other humans. It is the existence of long-lasting, durable objects that supplies the foci for shared experiences and allows for the formation of shared perspectives: “Since our feeling for reality depends ... upon the existence of a public realm into which things can appear out of the darkness of sheltered existence, even the twilight which illuminates our private and intimate lives is ultimately derived from the much harsher light of the public realm.”⁴⁰ It is only because durable objects like clothes, houses, tables, books, and utensils enter into and have a causal impact on the public realm and peoples’ lives that humans can frame their experiences in a way similar and communicable to each other and make sense of their own personal experiences and surroundings.

In sum, work, and consequently the products of *homo faber*, serve at least two important functions in Arendt’s social theory: they (1) provide the literal spatial environment and the stability necessary for the emergence of political life, from which authentic immortalization is made possible; and they (2) mediate the perspectives, experiences, and communication associated with communal life, allowing for the emergence of a common world. It is no surprise, then, that work, and consequently the products of *homo faber*, play an integral role in humans’ concern for immortality. This is in part because the very possibility for attaining an immortal life through the remembrance of great deeds and words depends on the existence of a stable physical environment that will not be completely destroyed due to natural processes — one that provides the requisite stability for each generation to develop and flourish.⁴¹

and therefore cannot provide humans with the stability required to sustain the physical world. This is not to say that everything of human artifice is extremely durable, but the products of work generally are more durable than the products of labor.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 51.

⁴¹ Some societies exist almost wholly in the private realm of labor, where providing for immediate needs takes up all of life. In these societies, dependence solely on oral tradition makes it difficult for the wisdom and heroic activities of individuals to be accurately and reliably passed down from generation to generation.

Thus, if one is attempting to achieve an immortal life through political speech and/or deeds, those human actions must be reified in some sort of document or record, and those records themselves must not be destroyed. Or the oral tradition that historicizes such speech and/or deeds must not decay.⁴² An authentic concern for immortality, then, requires both engaging in work that provides the preconditions for achieving immortality and developing, appraising, and utilizing the human artifice primarily for this intended use:

The *polis* was supposed to multiply occasions to win ‘immortal fame,’ ... to multiply the chances for everybody to distinguish himself, to show in deed and word who he was in his unique distinctness. One, if not the chief, reason for the incredible development of gift and genius in Athens, ... was to make the extraordinary an ordinary occurrence. The second function of the *polis* ... was to offer a remedy for the futility of action and speech; for the chances that a deed deserving fame would not be forgotten, that it actually would become ‘immortal,’ were not very good.⁴³

A human artifice that does not (1) multiply the opportunities for individuals to be remembered and (2) historicize the words and deeds of individuals makes achieving immortality nigh impossible. Therefore, I argue that the second requirement for an Arendtian, authentic concern for immortality is developing, appraising, and using the human artifice *for* immortalization, in a manner similar to how the ancient Greeks presumably developed, appraised, and utilized their human artifice.

3.3 Worldliness: Trust that the Human Artifice Will Outlive its Mortal Makers

Third, and finally, an authentic concern for immortality requires possessing a particular *attitude* towards the human artifice.⁴⁴ This requirement can be derived from Arendt’s discussion of the phenomenological feeling of worldlessness. Worldlessness is the feeling a person has when she is

⁴² If, for example, cybernetic modification holds the key to an immortal life, the totality of those physical-electrical components must not be destroyed or worn down if that life is to persist indefinitely. Similarly, if one is hoping to achieve an immortal life by uploading her consciousness into a digital environment, the computer and the environment in which the computer exists must be eternally insulated from complete loss of durability and functionality.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 197.

⁴⁴ An authentic concern for immortality may have other requirements as well, but determining, investigating, and explicating these three requirements is sufficient for the argument I am pursuing in this essay.

unable to connect with or understand the world around her, the condition an agent is in when she no longer bears shared conceptions of the things, institutions, and meanings around her with other members of society. In Arendtian terms, worldlessness is the feeling an agent possesses when she no longer inhabits a *common world* with other humans. For,

To live together in the world means essentially that a world of things is between those who have it in common, as a table is located between those who sit around it; the world, like every-inbetween, relates and separates men at the same time. The public realm, as the common world, gathers us together and yet prevents our falling over each other, so to speak.⁴⁵

The feeling of worldlessness, then, comes on when “the world between [people] has lost its power to gather them together, to relate, and to separate them.”⁴⁶ This feeling is mutually exclusive with any authentic concern for immortality because the very existence of worldlessness depends on an inherent *distrust* in the stability and durability of the human artifice:

Worldlessness as a political phenomenon is possible only on the assumption that the world will not last; on this assumption, however, it is almost inevitable that worldlessness, in one form or another, will begin to dominate the political scene. This happened after the downfall of the Roman Empire and, albeit for quite other reasons ... it seems to happen again in our own days.⁴⁷

Thus, for Arendt, the preconditions for worldlessness lie in the belief or tacit acceptance that the human artifice — much like the organisms embedded in the *natural* order — will suffer an inevitable end.⁴⁸

It follows that an authentic, Arendtian concern for immortality requires an attitude that is the opposite of worldlessness, namely, a trust that the human artifice *will* outlive the mortal hands of its builders, that the works and deeds of humans have a reasonable chance at historicization.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 52.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 53.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 54. The feeling of worldlessness may not be an exclusively modern phenomenon, but it is, according to Arendt, one of the defining characteristics of modern life.

⁴⁸ On an Arendtian analysis, it is unsurprising that many Americans today feel. For starters, the human artifice no longer clearly bears the marks of *homo faber*, nor does the human artifice communicate the durability and stability on which politics depend. In addition, the production and consumption habits of Western capitalistic societies, according to Baudrillard, continue to engender insecurity and produce feelings of alienation in workers. I will touch on this shortly. Finally, the activity of work in modern society has been labor-ized (both through the division of labor and the confusing of products of work *with* products of labor), which has produced a skewed understanding of the purpose of the human artifice and the laborer’s role in it.

Only a public space which “transcend[s] the life-span of mortal man” allows for the emergence of politics: “without this transcendence into a potential earthly immortality, no politics, ... no common world, and no public realm, is possible.”⁴⁹ Such an authentic concern would be constituted by contributions to the human artifice that seek to preserve its lasting *communal* quality rather than accelerating any one individual’s journey towards eternal life. Thus, an authentic Arendtian concern for immortality has at least three requirements: (1) holding to a metaphorical, political conception of immortality; (2) appraising, developing, and utilizing the human artifice primarily for this kind of immortalization through historicization; and (3) an attitude of trust in the human artifice that it will outlive the lives of its mortal makers.

It is these precise requirements for Arendt that together constitute an *authentic* concern for immortality, rather than an inauthentic concern, because they express what it really means to be human, a political creature. To be human, according to Arendt, means to live and act among others, to be part of a political *community*:

While all aspects of the human condition are somehow related to politics, [the condition of] plurality is specifically *the* condition — not only the *conditio sine qua non*, but the *conditio per quam* — of all political life. Thus the language of the Romans, perhaps the most political people we have known, used the words ‘to live’ and ‘to be among men’ (*inter homines esse*) or ‘to die’ and ‘to cease to be among men’ (*inter homines esse desinere*) as synonyms.⁵⁰

For it is only within such communities that freedom from necessity and political freedom are possible:

The chief difference between the Aristotelian and the later medieval use of [the term *bios politikos*] denoted explicitly only the realm of human affairs, stressing the action, *praxis*, needed to establish and sustain it. Neither labor nor work was considered to possess sufficient dignity to constitute a *bios* at all, an autonomous and authentically human way of life; since they served and produced what was necessary and useful, they could not be free, independent of humans needs and wants. That the political way of life escaped this verdict is due to the Greek understanding of the *polis* life, which to them denoted a very special and freely chosen form of political organization and by no means just any form of action necessary to keep men together in an orderly fashion.⁵¹

⁴⁹ Ibid., 55.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 7-8.

⁵¹ Ibid., 13.

What it means to be human — to live a *human* life — is to engage politically with others; an authentically human life is one that is not stuck within the activity of labor and, therefore, the realm of *animal laborans*. It is one in which humans rise above their animal existence in their capacity for great words and deeds through the practice of politics. As long as a concern for immortality does not have the aforementioned requirements, from out of which the uniquely human activity of politics under the condition of freedom may spring, such a concern cannot be authentic.

4 FOUR CHANGES IN HUMANS' CONCERN FOR IMMORTALITY

In order for Arendt to claim, then, that humans in the modern age have lost an authentic concern with immortality, some drastic changes must have occurred in how humans understand and apply their concept of immortality, their appraisal, development, or use of the human artifice, and/or their trust in the human artifice. Arendt clarifies her claim as follows:

[The loss of an authentic concern for immortality] is testified to by the current classification of striving for immortality with the private vice of vanity. Under modern conditions, it is indeed so unlikely that anybody should earnestly aspire to an earthly immortality that we probably are justified in thinking it is nothing but vanity.⁵²

She goes on to say that

The famous passage in Aristotle, 'Considering human affairs, one must not ... consider man as he is and not consider what is mortal in mortal things, but think about them [only] to the extent that they have the possibility of immortalizing,' occurs very properly in his political writings. For the *polis* was for the Greeks ... first of all their guarantee against the futility of individual life, the space protected against this futility and reserved for the relative permanence, if not immortality, of mortals.⁵³

The first suspect in our search for the cause(s) of modern humans' inauthentic concern for immortality is how humans' understanding of the concept of immortality itself has changed.

4.1 Change #1: Shifting Perceptions of Immortality in the Modern Age

First, humans' *perception* of the concept of immortality has changed. This is evidenced by Arendt's quote of Aristotle's claim above, that humans should not orient their lives with respect only to the 'here' and 'now,' but to think about these aspects "[only] to the extent that they have the possibility of immortaliz[ation]." The context in which this quote appears evinces its salience for Arendt's social theory: the line appears in Aristotle's discussion of the *vita contemplativa* being

⁵² Ibid., 56.

⁵³ Ibid., 56.

the happiest kind of life a human can achieve.⁵⁴ Insofar as the *vita contemplativa* utilizes *theoria*, or contemplation — a uniquely divine capacity, according to Aristotle — in order to ruminate on the eternal truths of the cosmos, Aristotle urges humans alike to, “so far as we can, make ourselves immortal.”⁵⁵ This attitude towards achieving an immortal life is a wholly positive one, and Aristotle actually *encourages* humans to both conceive of an immortal life in this way and to strive for it. This positive concern for immortality lies in stark contrast to the modern, negative perception of immortality, which is connected with the vice of vanity as shown above.⁵⁶

That a modern concern for immortality is associated with the vice of vanity indicates another important shift in humans’ concept of immortality since the time of the ancient Greeks. The ancient Greek conception of immortality was culturally informed by a distinct form of polytheism. According to this Greek polytheism, the main difference separating humans and the gods consisted not in their respective natures, but in the lengths of their lives.⁵⁷ In fact, the Greeks posited that humans — with emotions, desires, and bodies, who existed in time and space — had the same fundamental nature as the gods.⁵⁸ The *vita activa* and the *vita contemplativa* for the

⁵⁴ Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics*, 1177b27-35.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 1177b34.

⁵⁶ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 55. The very idea of striving for an immortal life has been banished to the class of activities that is no longer just not encouraged, but *discouraged* altogether. As far as I can tell, an integral part of the ancient *bios politikos* consisted necessarily in the creation or production of actions and deeds — engaging in politics was a wholly *positive* activity which produced something real in the public realm, or at least contributed to sustaining an enduring public realm where such speech and action could occur. In the modern age, one needs to look no further than the Christian tradition to see how striving for immortality is a wholly *negative* activity, the attainment of grace (and, consequently, salvation) being a free gift from God and the permission into heaven being granted to those who engage in lives of asceticism and *abstention* from sin, temptation, and the activities associated with this world. Christianity, in contrast to the *bios politikos*, is primarily concerned with ceasing activity associated with the sinful world that surrounds and conditions humans: “Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, love for the Father is not in them. For everything in the world — the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life — comes not from the Father but from the world. The world and its desires pass away, but whoever does the will of God lives forever” (1 John 2:15-17). We see, then, in Judeo-Christian religions the shunning of worldly projects, desires, and objects.

⁵⁷ Mikalson, *Ancient Greek Religion*, 32.

⁵⁸ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 18. I am not claiming that all forms of Greek polytheism are the same. Nor am I claiming that *all* Greeks had the same conception of immortality or the gods. Nevertheless, I think it is reasonable that some kind of generalization can be made that is both interesting and accurate for the present analysis.

Greeks constituted modes of being that exercised this divine nature inherent in each of them.⁵⁹ Thus, achieving immortality for the Greeks involved exercising the divine capacity of reason in the *vita activa* within the public realm of the *polis* in word and deed which, with help from the human artifice of *homo faber*, would be historicized, leaving behind an immortal legacy.

This conception of immortality is quite different from modern humans' conception(s) of immortality, and enumerating the differences between these conceptions indicates that the concern for immortality modern humans have is inauthentic. For starters, while the ancient Greek conception of immortality is informed by polytheism, modern humans religiously-tinted conception of immortality is infected by a distinct form of monotheism.⁶⁰ In stark contrast to Greek polytheism, modern monotheistic conceptions of immortality posit many salient differences between the natures of God and man.⁶¹ In addition, achieving immortality does not come about by the exercising of some divine capacity, but occurs by possessing the relevant *belief* set, and places emphasis on living one's life in a morally appropriate way or 'God-pleasing' way.⁶² While achieving immortality according to the ancient Greeks required the existence of an earthly

⁵⁹ According to the ancient Greeks, the *vita activa* utilizes the divine capacity of reason, *logos*, and the *vita contemplativa* utilizes the capacity of contemplation, *theoria*.

⁶⁰ The religions whose conceptualizations of immortality I have in mind are Christianity, Islam, and Judaism.

⁶¹ According to Christianity, Judaism, and Islam, there exists only one God who is taken to have a drastically different nature than that of humans — God is said to be omnibenevolent, omnipotent, and omniscient. The Greek gods (e.g. Zeus, Ares, Hera, etc.) do not have these characteristics. More specifically, for example, the popularization of the concept of original sin in Christianity à la Martin Luther has dealt a damaging blow to the idea that humans possess within them sparks of divinity whatsoever. In addition, some argue that, in contrast to the Greek gods, the Judeo-Christian God does not exist in time or in this universe.

⁶² Most proponents of Judeo-Christian religions fervently reject that humans possess any sort of divine capacity at all. Lutheranism's doctrine of total depravity posits that humans are imperfect all the way to the core, lacking even the ability to pull themselves up by their bootstraps out of the mire of death and eternal damnation. Catholicism, with the addition of good works, also requires the intervention of God for achieving a paradisiacal eternal life. In this way, the ancient Greeks and modern Christians are similar: achieving immortality cannot be achieved individually — it is not a solitary pursuit one can complete on her own. While Greek polytheism posits an afterlife of its own, namely the underworld ruled by the Greek god Hades, only Elysium and the Isles of the Blessed offer souls the possibility for a blissful eternal existence. In general, Mikalson argues that ancient Greek religion accepted the existence of the soul after death, but saw the afterlife as rather meaningless (and, perhaps, valueless) considering the existent souls lost most of their physical and psychological capacities and became incapable of heroic action and speech altogether (177-178).

community of individuals acting in concert in a human artifice capable of historicization, achieving immortality according to modern, religiously-tinted conceptions do not require a community of earthly individuals acting in concert, nor much of a human artifice at all. In addition, modern religiously-tinted conceptions prioritize achieving immortality very differently. In Christianity for example, immortality in heaven is a *consequence* of true belief in Christ's salvation message, sinless life, and crucifixion, but immortality is *not* meant to be pursued as an end in itself. (Attempting to acquire faith in God *so that* one may achieve a blissful eternal life is contrary to the Bible's command to be selfless.⁶³ Nor is praising God to be done so that one may achieve a blissful eternal life.⁶⁴) Whatever the primary reason for pursuing immortality according to modern, religiously-tinted conceptions is, it is not to leave behind a lasting legacy on Earth, and it does not require any significant public communal life. Insofar as modern, religiously-tinted conceptions prescribe attaining immortality at all, they do not do so for the same reasons or by the same methods that the ancient Greek conception prescribes.

There exist of course other modern conceptions of immortality, but these do not match up with the ancient Greek conception either. For example, modern humans' *biological* conception of immortality is not so much about leaving behind a lasting legacy as it is about extending indefinitely the biological life of the individual body. The difficulty of attaining this type of immortality may be one of the reasons why attempting to achieve an immortal life is actively discouraged in the modern age.⁶⁵

⁶³ "No one should seek their own good, but the good of others" (1 Corinthians 10:24).

⁶⁴ "Let them give thanks to the LORD for his unfailing love and his wonderful deeds for mankind, for he satisfies the thirsty and fills the hungry with good things" (Psalm 107:8-9).

⁶⁵ That achieving immortality in the modern age is discouraged is evidenced by the fact that the modern age has produced many works of philosophy arguing that an immortal life is wholly undesirable, and therefore should not be pursued. See, for example, Williams (1973), Smuts (2011), Cholbi (2015), and Benatar (2017).

If my analysis is correct, modern humans' conception(s) and perception(s) of immortality differ from the ancient Greek conception in fundamental ways: they posit differing (1) views of human nature, (2) requirements for attaining immortality, (3) views on the importance of leaving behind an earthly legacy, and (4) are informed by dissimilar theologies. Thus, insofar as modern conceptions of immortality differ greatly from the conception of immortality that provided the grounds for ancient Greek political life, modern humans' perceptions of immortality and the activities surrounding it have also changed.

If Arendt is right, the fact that immortality is associated with *any* vice whatsoever in the modern age constitutes another noteworthy aspect of the modern concern for immortality. According to Arendt, vices, insofar as they are objects of personal, subjective experience, find their home in the private realm and are inaccessible by and oftentimes indescribable to others.⁶⁶ (The archetype of this kind of private, publicly inaccessible and indescribable experience, pain, is said by Arendt to be “perhaps the only experience which we are unable to transform into a shape fit for public appearance ... [and] is so subjective and removed from the world of things and men that it cannot assume an appearance at all.”⁶⁷) The fact that a concern for immortality is now associated with a vice, a mental object whose force and compulsive nature is felt privately and individually, indicates that the modern concern for immortality is more closely associated with the modern private realm than the public political realm of antiquity. For all intents and purposes,

⁶⁶ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 51. If one concedes that language is itself an invention of humans, one feels the immediate difficulty in utilizing it, an object, as a vehicle for expression of some phenomenology which has no logical connections to the visible, public realm. See also Arendt's discussion in *On Revolution*, p. 81.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 51. This view might be contrasted with the views of Ludwig Wittgenstein in his *Philosophical Investigations*. Language, Wittgenstein argues, does not consist of privately-held entities to which only the person having them has access and can refer. Pain, being a communicable concept, shows us that language itself is a public artifact — there can be no private language — and the definitions of words are derived from their public use. There are no words that could refer to some private concept or sensation, like an agent's individual pain. See also Arendt's discussion in *On Revolution*, p. 85-91.

striving for immortality itself seems in large part to have migrated from the public realm of politics to the private realm in the modern age.⁶⁸

4.2 Change #2: The Development and Utilization of the Human Artifice in the Modern Age

In addition to the aforementioned changes in humans' concept of immortality, their attitude towards it, and the realm in which such striving for immortality occurs, humans' concern for immortality has also changed with respect to *why* and *how* humans continue to create and sustain the human artifice more generally. Modern humans' intentions behind creating and sustaining the human artifice and their modes of doing so also indicate that their concern for immortality is inauthentic on Arendt's view.

According to Arendt, during the times of the ancient Greek and Romans the development of the human artifice served a clear primary purpose: to provide a durable, physical environment for humans to make achieving immortality possible and to increase the number of opportunities for its achievement.⁶⁹ If we recall Arendt's discussion of the primary aim of the development of the *polis*, the public realm, she says, "The *polis* was supposed to multiply the occasions to win 'immortal fame,' ... to multiply the chances for everybody to distinguish himself."⁷⁰ Thus, for the

⁶⁸ Ibid., 52. Achieving immortality according to some of earth's major religions in the modern age (i.e. Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Hinduism) is a largely private affair in and of itself. Kierkegaard's works echo this sentiment: "For Kierkegaard Christian faith is not a matter of regurgitating church dogma. It is a matter of individual subjective passion, which cannot be mediated by the clergy or by human artefacts" (SEP). Achieving immortality in the modern age does not require plurality, unlike the immortalization salient to ancient Greek life. While modern-day religious individuals do come together in groups for worship, sacrament, events, and pilgrimages, these meetings are not required for achieving immortality. Rather, such meetings for many religious individuals in my personal experience constitute *insurance* for entry into heaven, because the private affair of living up to God's standards is difficult without external, communal support.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 197.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 197.

ancient Greeks, the primary purpose of creating and sustaining the human artifice was to provide a space for political action for the achievement of immortality through word and deed.

The purpose of the human artifice and the nature of production and consumption are objects of investigation by many contemporary social theorists, such as Jean Baudrillard, whose analyses also reveal that the primary purpose of the human artifice now is drastically different from that of the ancient Greeks. While the ancient Greeks contributed to the human artifice with an eye towards the durability of objects, their use-value, and the stability such objects could provide to the public realm, Baudrillard claims that the producers of objects in the modern age share few if any of these concerns: “What is produced today is not produced for its use-value or its possible durability, but rather with an *eye to its death*.”⁷¹ To meet economic demand, not only is society producing objects with little concern for durability, but they are also producing objects with the explicit understanding that such objects will be *consumed* rather than *used up*.

Baudrillard’s view is empirically supported by the unnecessary, prodigious proliferation of objects saturating society and the extent to which planned or forced obsolescence is a feature of production. The number of products entering into Western, capitalist markets and being consumed by humans is not directly proportional to the durability that these objects actually possess, nor is this number proportional to the actual needs and desires of humans. One needs to look no further than the plethora of functional goods donated or sold every day or the mountains of functional goods that crowd landfills to discover that consumer goods are treated not as objects of work, but rather as objects of labor. The very existence of this kind of ‘waste’ is a testament to the excessive production and consumption habits of society: “[O]ur whole economy has become a waste economy,” says Arendt in *The Human Condition*, “[an economy] in which things must be almost

⁷¹ Baudrillard, *The Consumer Society: Myths and Structures*, 46.

as quickly devoured and discarded as they have appeared in the world, if the [production and consumption] process itself is not to come to a sudden catastrophic end.”⁷² Baudrillard agrees and argues in fact that the very structure of western, capitalistic economies is dependent on consumption habits like these: “[T]he order of production only survives by paying the price of this extermination, this perpetual calculated 'suicide' of the mass of objects ... this operation is based on technological 'sabotage' or organized obsolescence.”⁷³

Such forced or planned obsolescence comes in many forms. *Contrived durability* intentionally compromises the longevity of a product. *Prevention of repairs* seeks to make products extremely difficult to service, through the limiting of access to repair parts or professionals who can legally service such devices. *Perceived obsolescence* is the tactic of convincing the public that current models are no longer ‘in style.’ *Systemic obsolescence* is a tactic designed to alter the system of consumption to make continued use of the product more difficult. *Programmed obsolescence* is intentionally designing a product to fail or malfunction after a certain amount of time or uses.

This analysis indicates that the extent to which forced obsolescence is present in capitalist economies is staggering, indicating something important about modern humans’ concern for immortality. By all accounts, such obsolescence is systemic and plays an integral role in how both producers and consumers perceive the human artifice. Real life examples abound in Apple’s

⁷² Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 134.

⁷³ Baudrillard, *The Consumer Society*, 46. Forced or planned obsolescence comes in many forms. Contrived durability intentionally compromises the longevity of a product. Prevention of repairs seeks to make products extremely difficult to service, through the limiting of access to repair parts or professionals who can legally service such devices. Perceived obsolescence is the tactic of convincing the public that current models are no longer ‘in style.’ Systemic obsolescence is a tactic designed to alter the system of consumption to make continued use of the product more difficult. Programmed obsolescence is intentionally designing a product to stop working after a certain amount of time or uses. The point is that the extent to which forced obsolescence is present in the hypercompetitive markets of capitalist economies is staggering. By all accounts, it is systemic and plays an integral role in how both producers and consumers perceive the human artifice.

production practices: to name just a few, iTunes runs slower on Windows computers; iPhones are designed to be damaged if charged by third-party devices; and most iPhone or Mac pieces of hardware are *not* industry standard, requiring individuals to seek out specific Apple-licensed repair facilities if their device gets damaged.

No longer, then, does society in the modern world produce the human artifice as a space for immortalization and a bulwark against the eroding, fatal processes of nature, but rather, it seems, for wealth and/or the growth of capitalist enterprise, which are driven by economic analyses and unsustainable consumer habits. These differences in the development and utilization of the human artifice signals that modern humans' concern for immortality fails to fulfill the second requirement for an authentic concern.

4.3 Change #3: Appraisal of the Human Artifice in the Modern Age

In addition, humans' concern for immortality is determined not only by the development and utilization of the human artifice, but the ways in which they *appraise* the human artifice itself before, during, and after its production. Here, Baudrillard is again instructive: he argues that one of the key trends of the modern age has been a dramatic rise in the production and consumption of commodities, significantly affecting the valuation of objects in society.⁷⁴ Before the modern age, Baudrillard argues that the production and consumption of human goods was dominated by two primary forms of valuation: *use-value* and *exchange-value*.⁷⁵ Use-value denotes the utility of a particular product, its value being governed by how well the item fulfills its particular functional role, or how well the object 'gets the job done.' Exchange-value, on the other hand, denotes the

⁷⁴ Levin, *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*, 5.

⁷⁵ Ritzer, *The Consumer Society: Myths and Structures*, 6.

value of a product in relation to another product, its value being governed by what it could be exchanged for that is of equal value. Exchange-value is not typically determined by how well an object ‘gets the job done,’ but by what humans perceive as being equal in value to that particular object.

According to Baudrillard, commodities present before and during the early stages of competitive, market-driven capitalism were valued in these two ways and largely determined the production and consumption habits of a society, but now another form of valuation is responsible for determining the production and consumption habits of a society. Baudrillard calls this new form of valuation *sign-value*. For Baudrillard, the production and consumption habits of society are now governed primarily by what those objects *signify to others* rather than the use-value that such objects possess for human life.⁷⁶ The clothes humans wear, the cars they drive, the electronic devices they use — in short, the products they buy and produce — are appraised primarily not for their intrinsic use-value, but for their capacity to stand as forms of personal expression (e.g. signifiers of wealth, class, or ideology).

If Baudrillard is right, the primary valuation of the human artifice is governed by sign-value rather than use-value. Fundamentally, then, humans in the modern age appraise the human artifice differently than their ancient ancestors: while the Greeks appraised the human artifice primarily through the lens of use-value, the durability and stability of the human artifice as functional for the emergence of political life which makes possible the metaphorical immortalization of man, by contrast humans in the modern age view the human artifice primarily

⁷⁶ Baudrillard, *The Consumer Society: Myths and Structures*, 77. It is unclear whether the transition from valuing the human artifice primarily based on use-value to sign-value precedes or proceeds from the increased rate of production in capitalist societies. It may be that, because (e)valuations of artifice transitioned from use-value to sign-value, producers began increasing the rate of production to take advantage of the increase in economic demand. Or, it may be that the abundance of goods themselves may have caused humans to begin to value objects for what they could and do signify rather than for their functional use. Or, perhaps, the changes in production and consumption have gone hand-in-hand.

through the lens of sign-value, whose primary concerns are the production and consumption of goods as forms of communication and personal expression to others. This change in valuation, in tandem with the loss of concern in the human artifice's durability and an increased concern in the human artifice's ability to be used as a mode of personal expression, partly constitutes modern humans' inauthentic concern for immortality.

4.4 Change #4: Significations of the Human Artifice and the Consequences of Modern Production and Consumption

However, what is more fundamental than and what informs humans' perception(s) and concept(s) of immortality and their appraisal, development, and utilization of the human artifice, is the 'language' itself that the human artifice 'speaks' — not the signs, connotations, and meanings humans *attach* to objects, but what the objects themselves *signify* to consumers. The 'language' of the human artifice itself, Baudrillard argues, also plays an integral role in shaping human psychology and, by extension, I argue, modern humans' inauthentic concern with immortality.⁷⁷

The language of the human artifice, as guided by the activities of production and consumption, takes on a different flavor depending on how humans appraise the human artifice. A human artifice intended to outlive its maker, crafted with the intention to provide a durable and stable space for the emergence of political life and the potential metaphorical immortalization of the deeds and works of man, will tend to express such characteristics.⁷⁸ Being stable and durable,

⁷⁷ I put 'language' in apostrophes because, according to Baudrillard in *The Consumer Society: Myths and Structures*, while the significations of the human artifice do operate according to a certain logical structure, they do not actually form a *language* with a logical, syntactic structure at all: "Advertising as a whole has no *meaning*. It merely conveys *significations*. Its significations (and the behaviours they call forth) are never personal: they are all *differential*; they are all marginal and combinatorial. In other words, they are of the order of the *industrial production of differences*..." (88).

⁷⁸ Barring, of course, interference between the objects of perception and the perceptions of those objects themselves.

the human artifice will tend to express stability and durability to its human evaluators. Being made by human hands, it will tend to express the nuances and imperfections of human craft. And, insofar as the human artifice is intended for these purposes, it will also tend to express the fact that it ought to be *used* to completely fulfill its function, that its function cannot be exhausted without humans using it in the intended way.

However, the human artifice today is *not* in fact understood or used in these ways. First, the frequency with which forced or planned obsolescence is presumed and utilized in the production of goods testifies to the fact that humans neither intend for nor perceive the objects constituting the human artifice as being particularly stable or durable, or providing the preconditions for immortalization. According to Baudrillard, we no longer view objects constituting the human artifice as durable, stable objects at all. In the modern age, such objects live and die much like consumables: they play a role in sustaining modern life, but they perish quickly and are unable to provide the human artifice with the stability and durability required for immortalization. Baudrillard says,

We live by object time ... we live at the pace of objects, live to the rhythm of their ceaseless succession. Today, it is we who watch them as they are born, grow to maturity and die, whereas in all previous civilizations it was timeless objects, instruments or monuments which outlived the generations of human beings.⁷⁹

A dramatic shift in the way humans produce and perceive objects has occurred: no longer are the objects constituting the human artifice perceived as possessing durability, nor are they designed for permanence.

Arendt supports these claims with her analysis of the mechanization and automation of production processes as well:

The very abundance of [products] transforms them into consumer goods. The endlessness of the laboring process is guaranteed by the ever-recurrent needs of consumption; the endlessness of production can be assured only if its products lose their use character and become more and more

⁷⁹ Ibid., 26.

objects of consumption, or ... the rate of use is so tremendously accelerated that the objective difference between use and consumption, between the relative durability of use objects and the swift coming and going of consumer goods, dwindles to insignificance.⁸⁰

These analyses support the claim that the human artifice in the modern age no longer expresses durability and stability, nor does it express much of a conscious human intention for political immortalization at all.⁸¹

Similarly, no longer do the majority of goods bear the marks of human producers. For Arendt, the human artifice is losing its ability to communicate the marks of human producers themselves, because fewer and fewer goods are being produced *by* humans and humans themselves are playing a less formative role in production processes. According to Arendt, the division of labor in society and the breaking up the laboring processes into distinct, repetitive tasks, along with the automation of such processes, directly cause “the production of objects of whose ultimate shape [the vast majority of laborers] ha[ve] not the slightest notion.”⁸² On account of causally interacting less and less with the human artifice, laborers and consumers are becoming increasingly alienated with respect to the production processes they participate in and the creation of human artifice itself; Marxist analyses of capitalism provide support for this claim.⁸³ In addition, the distinguishing marks of *homo faber* disappear in *economic* analyses of production of these capitalist systems, which intentionally ignore the boundaries between the public and private realms: “Economists lump together the value of all products and services of all kinds, making no distinction between public and private services. Nuisances and palliatives to them figure in the accounts on the same basis as the production of objectively useful goods.”⁸⁴

⁸⁰ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 125.

⁸¹ The shining light in this sea of darkness (if there is one) is found in the seriousness with which some individuals take social injustice. This fact, a possible objection to my view, will be discussed in a later section.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 141.

⁸³ See, for example, Railton (1984), Nussbaum (1995), and Foster (1999).

⁸⁴ Baudrillard, *The Consumer Society*, 41.

It is no wonder then that striving for an immortal life has been largely given up. Not only are the boundaries between the public and private realms disappearing in the modern age — the very boundaries humans depend upon to make sense of their perceptions of themselves, their environment, and the human artifice, as well as orient themselves in the world — but the production processes of capitalist societies and the working conditions of laborers in general continue to contribute to increased alienation and wordlessness. The disposability of laborers in the capitalist machine among other factors in consumer society comes at a serious cost: “the sense of generalized insecurity [the consumer society] engenders.”⁸⁵ And, without the human artifice providing feelings of security and stability, no attempts to achieve an immortal life can be initiated without great risk and uncomfortability.

Arendt argues in fact that “[W]hat dominates the labor process ... is neither mans’ purposeful effort nor the product he may desire, but the motion of the process itself and the rhythm it imposes upon the laborers.”⁸⁶ Indeed,

In the mode of production ushered in by automation, the distinction between operation and product, as well as the product’s precedence over the operation (which is only the means to produce the end), no longer make sense and have become obsolete. The categories of *homo faber* and his world apply no more than they ever could apply to nature and the natural universe ... In other words, *homo faber*, the toolmaker, invented tools and implements in order to erect a world ... The question therefore is not so much whether we are the masters or the slaves of our machines, but whether machines still serve the world and its things, or if, on the contrary, they and the automatic motion of their processes have begun to rule and even destroy the world of things.⁸⁷

Increased automation of the production process, as well as the loss of purposeful contributions to the human artifice serving the task of achieving an immortal life, has rendered the human artifice incapable of communicating the distinct marks of *homo faber*:

The channeling of natural forces into the human world has shattered the very purposefulness of the world, the fact that objects are the ends for which tools and implements are designed. It is characteristic

⁸⁵ Ibid., 41.

⁸⁶ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 146.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 151.

of all natural processes that they come into being without the help of man, and those things are natural which are not 'made' but grow by themselves into whatever they become.⁸⁸

Now, production processes mirror the eternal, cyclical nature of natural processes, which lie in the realm of *animal laborans*.⁸⁹ The majority of objects constituting the human artifice in the modern age lack directly perceivable connections to the life and activities of *homo faber*.

A related point is that the modern human artifice generally no longer seems to serve the interest of humans in the same way it did for the ancient Greeks and Romans. According to Arendt, not even the needs of the laborers themselves, who are responsible for producing the human artifice, take precedence over “startling increases in [economic] efficiency.”⁹⁰ It is difficult to see how the modern human artifice — as part, parcel, and product of the processes of mass production, mechanization, and automation — serves to meet *any* desire for immortalization, or the desires of humans in general, over and above the mere growth, accumulation, and expenditure of capital. The production and manufacturing of goods has taken precedence over providing for the needs of humans or securing the stability of the human artifice.⁹¹ Thus, the significations of the human artifice (i.e. *instability* and *impermanence*) and the fact that the human artifice now in the modern age operates largely independently of human hands and understanding, contribute to their inauthentic concern for immortality.

Ultimately, we see that modern humans' concern for immortality lacks all of the requirements necessary for an authentic concern. Not only does humans' modern concern utilize a concept of immortality that differs from that of the ancient Greeks and Romans, but the modern human artifice possesses neither the stability nor durability required for immortalization and

⁸⁸ Ibid., 150.

⁸⁹ Natural processes and the processes of mass production and consumption are both grand in scale and scope, operate largely according to their own rhythm, and are seemingly too powerful for any one human to control.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 152.

⁹¹ Rousseau, *Discourse on Inequality*, 30.

historicization. The modern human artifice does not seem to be created for the purpose of immortalization, nor does modern humans' attitude towards the human artifice constitute a trust that it will outlive its mortal makers. These characteristics and significations, as we have seen, can be observed by carefully analyzing the features of the human artifice itself and the social practices surrounding its production and consumption.

5 A CAVEAT, OBJECTIONS, AND RESPONSES

The preceding analysis, however, is not completely cut-and-dry, and an important caveat must be added to preserve its veracity. While I have demonstrated that humans *in general* no longer possess an authentic, Arendtian concern for immortality, my analysis should not be read as claiming that *all* humans lack an authentic concern for immortality. That is the caveat I would like to introduce here: neither Arendt's analysis nor my own should be interpreted as claiming that an authentic concern for immortality has *completely* disappeared from the modern age. Rather, the claim posits that the majority of humans no longer possess such a concern, a majority sufficiently large enough to ensure that an authentic concern no longer plays a significantly formative role in the development of the human artifice and politics.

In any case, even with the addition of this caveat, there are at least three objections to the argument I have given in this essay in support of Arendt's claim. Each objection can be viewed as an objection associated with each one of the requirements for an authentic concern for immortality. The first objection directly challenges Arendt's claim that humans in the modern age have lost a concern with immortality — the first requirement. The second objection challenges my claim that the current human artifice is not developed, appraised, or utilized for immortalization — the second requirement. And the third objection argues, contrary to my claim, that humans do in fact possess a trust that the human artifice will outlive its mortal makers — the third requirement. I will address each objection in turn.

5.1 Objection #1: “Modern Humans Are Still Concerned with Immortality”

According to the first objection, there is empirical evidence indicating that humans in the modern age are more concerned with immortality than ever. For the last few decades — perhaps even

during Arendt's lifetime — groups and organizations have been engaging in scientific research in order to (indefinitely) extend biological life. For instance, the Strategies for Engineered Negligible Senescence (SENS) Research Foundation is currently engaged in research to reverse aging in humans.⁹² In addition, the Cryonics Institute is currently engaged in the storage of human bodies until technology advances to the point at which humans will be able to eradicate disease and defy death entirely.⁹³ And the transhumanist organization *Humanity+* is currently researching technologies that would allow humans to transcend their biological limitations by uploading their minds into computers.⁹⁴ Many more organizations and humans exist with aims like these. There is, then, significant empirical evidence indicating that many humans are concerned with achieving an immortal life, implying that Arendt is wrong in her claim that humans in the modern age lack a concern for immortality.

If Arendt were concerned with the immortalization of individual human lives *simpliciter*, the existence of these organizations would run contrary to Arendt's argument, but to accept the existence of these organizations as real counterexamples ignores the particular nature of Arendt's claim. Arendt argues that humans in the modern age have lost an *authentic* concern for immortality, not a concern for immortality altogether. One of the requirements for an authentic concern for immortality is a particular political conception of immortality, one that is associated with leaving behind a lasting legacy which harbors a concern for worldly things. For Arendt, one can only leave behind such a lasting legacy if one performs memorable-enough speech and action that appears in the light of the public realm. And one cannot accomplish these memorable words and deeds alone. They must be performed in the human artifice, specifically in the political, public

⁹² See www.sens.org.

⁹³ See www.cryonics.org.

⁹⁴ See www.humanityplus.org.

realm. On Arendt's view, we act only in concert; political speech and action always occurs in groups, never by just one person.⁹⁵

Thus, in light of my analysis of Arendt's conception of authenticity, these empirical pieces of evidence which show various humans are attempting to achieve individual religious or biological types of immortality is not a true counterexample to Arendt's claim, because such aims rely on conceptions of immortality that are not based on the political conception of immortality inherited from the ancient Greeks. Far from being concerned with leaving behind a lasting legacy after one's physical death, these modern attempts to achieve immortality utilize a conception of immortality that is constituted by extending one's life indefinitely. As I have argued earlier, such a conception lies in stark contrast to the metaphorical, political conception of immortality that constitutes an authentic, Arendtian concern.

In addition, the type of immortality pursued by modern groups and organizations differs in another important respect from political immortality: whereas the political immortality pursued by the ancient Greeks was necessarily communitarian, the achieving of immortality coming only about through one's memorable appearance in the public realm among other humans, the immortality pursued nowadays has no communitarian element. Achieving individual, biological immortality does not require or encourage interaction with other humans or appearance in the public realm at all, nor does it harbor a necessary concern for worldly things through attempts to sustain the human artifice for self and others. No matter how long the lifespan of one human being becomes, on Arendt's view no memorable action that can provide the means for immortalization takes place unless humans act among other humans.

⁹⁵ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 188.

On this point, Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben's analysis of modern society's response to COVID-19 is instructive:

The first thing that the wave of panic that has paralyzed the country obviously shows is that our society no longer believes in anything but bare life. It is obvious that Italians are disposed to sacrifice practically everything — the normal conditions of life, social relationships, work, even friendships, affections, and religious and political convictions — to the danger of getting sick. Bare life — and the danger of losing it — is not something that unites people, but blinds and separates them. Other human beings, as in the plague described in Alessandro Manzoni's novel, are now seen solely as possible spreaders of the plague whom one must avoid at all costs and from whom one needs to keep oneself at a distance of at least a meter. The dead — our dead — do not have a right to a funeral and it is not clear what will happen to the bodies of our loved ones. Our neighbor has been cancelled and it is curious that churches remain silent on the subject. What do human relationships become in a country that habituates itself to live in this way for who knows how long? And what is a society that has no value other than survival?⁹⁶

What Agamben's analysis reveals is that modern humans are more concerned with mere survival than upholding the practices of social interaction and political engagement. Modern society's response to COVID-19 reveals what is, according to Arendt, a defining characteristic of the modern age:

[L]ife, and not the world, is the highest good of many [in the modern age]. . . [we] no longer know of those other higher and more meaningful activities for the sake of which freedom would deserve to be won.⁹⁷

Modern humans' concern for life over upholding the practices of social interaction and political engagement showcases why employing the modern biological conception of immortality in our attempts to achieve it is bound to be inauthentic: such a conception separates humans rather than unites them, and it is highly unlikely that people divided philosophically or spatially can develop a culture that succeeds at providing for conditions of historicization, the possibility of remembrance. Focus on individual life over all things minimizes if not obliterates freedom on Arendt's view, which directly impacts social-political life. Thus, it is unlikely that modern

⁹⁶ Agamben, "Clarifications," web.

⁹⁷ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 313-314.

conceptions of immortality can do the heavy lifting required to provide the conditions necessary for leaving behind a lasting legacy after death.

5.2 Objection #2: “The Modern Human Artifice is Appraised, Developed, and Utilized in the Proper Way”

The second objection challenges my claim that the human artifice is not currently developed, appraised, or utilized for immortalization. More specifically, this objection challenges my claim that the modern human artifice does not provide adequate means for the immortalization of individuals. Proponents of this objection might argue that the advent of social media may in fact provide the durable and stable means for immortalization that Arendt requires. Social media has revolutionized how humans interact with one another and may provide a more robust means of immortalization than speech and action in the ordinary, spatial public realm. Social media platforms, by allowing humans to upload instances of speech and action unto digital landscapes, have increased the potential for their visibility and the speed by which information about such instances of human action is disseminated, and such platforms themselves also act as tools for historicization, like written records and oral traditions. In addition, social media platforms are used widely and frequently by many humans, indicating that they are a robust part of the human artifice. The second objection might then argue that the possibility for humans to authentically immortalize themselves can be found in the parts of the human artifice associated with the digital age, such as the world wide web and, more specifically, social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, Reddit, and other social spaces on the internet.

However, even these social practices and parts of the human artifice, I argue, cannot provide humans with the possibility of political immortalization. The first reason for this is that I

do not believe that humans can *practically* utilize social media and digital forms of communication as a means for immortalization. The first worry I have is that the human artifice as a whole is not stable or durable enough for historicizing contemporary politics. However, provided the human artifice was stable and durable enough for immortalization, there exists yet another practical concern. Although the world wide web provides a great number of opportunities for some kind of digital immortalization, the sheer number of individuals producing online forms of speech and action and the content of these submissions present a problem for attaining some kind of digital-political form of immortality: the sheer multitude of online content being produced every day may wash out the genuine instances of noble speech and action that get an individual recognized and remembered.

Another practical concern is that, due to the ease of producing and disseminating online content, it has only become easier for humans in the modern age to eschew reflecting on whether or not the content they are producing is useful or itself worthy of standing in the light of the public realm. The current psychologies and consumption habits of humans make it unlikely that genuine or heroic instances of political speech and action would receive the attention they deserve over forms of entertainment, fake news, advertisements, and mundane autobiographical reports. Such instances of speech and action do little if anything to memorialize individuals and/or pass on the human legacy to successive generations. Thus, it is very unlikely that even the most avid internet users would achieve a lasting legacy in today's digital-political climate.⁹⁸

⁹⁸ Digital trends of 2019 reveal that the world's top 20 visited websites include 3 search engines, 4 social platforms, 3 adult websites, 2 video streaming sites, 3 portals, 1 reference site, 1 shopping website, 1 email site, and only 1 news site, and a combined total of over 14 billion unique profiles exist across the top 20 social media platforms (<https://thenextweb.com/contributors/2019/01/30/digital-trends-2019-every-single-stat-you-need-to-know-about-the-internet/>). The top 10 trending searches on Google for 2019, the world's most visited website, were Disney Plus, Cameron Boyce, Nipsey Hussle, Hurricane Dorian, Antonio Brown, Luke Perry, *Avengers Endgame*, *Game of Thrones*, iPhone 11, and Jussie Smollett, respectively; there are currently almost 352 million registered domain names in the world (<https://www.broadbandsearch.net/blog/internet-statistics#post-navigation-0>). But what humans use the internet for most often is most striking. Americans spend 37% of their internet time on social networks, 29% with

There are, however, also *conceptual* issues with taking the internet and social media platforms as reliable means of immortalization. While the development of cloud technology gives social media platforms and forms of digital information a kind of durability that spatial objects do not have, the very fact that online interaction does not occur in the spatial presence of other humans may disqualify them from being properly political on Arendt's view. Though online interactions do oftentimes occur in a public arena of sorts, and as such are illuminated by the light of the (digital) public realm, insofar as Arendt's conception of politics is based on a life lived literally among humans, online instances of action and speech do not seem to be the kinds of political action that can fill the lacuna left by the disappearance of ancient political modes of life. For, on Arendt's view,

In acting and speaking, men show who they are, reveal actively their unique personal identities and thus make their appearance in the human world ... This disclosure of 'who' in contradistinction to 'what' somebody is ... is implicit in everything somebody says and does ... Action ... is never possible in isolation; to be isolated is to be deprived of the capacity to act. Action and speech need the surrounding presence of others no less than fabrication needs the surrounding presence of nature for its material, and of a world in which to place the finished product.⁹⁹

First, it is not obvious that the majority of online instances of speech and action occur in groups or in the presence of others. It seems, rather, that such instances occur usually in spatial isolation from other humans. The burden of proof is on proponents of this objection to demonstrate that such online instances of speech and action do occur among humans and can count as genuine instances of action for Arendt. Similarly, if the defining characteristic of action discloses who the agent is, as Arendt argues in the quote above, it must be demonstrated that the majority of online instances of speech and action has this characteristic of individualization. But the homogenous

email, 23% watching online videos, 23% performing web searches, 19% on gaming, 8% on blogging, 8% listening to online radio, 5% reading online newspapers, 3% reading online magazines, and 31% performing other activities (<https://www.businessinsider.com/heres-what-people-do-on-the-internet-all-day-2014-5>). These activities imply that Americans spend the vast majority of their time passively consuming online content rather than actively producing their own meaningful political content.

⁹⁹ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 175-188.

nature of online content and interactions among humans seem to run contrary to this claim. In addition, humans' increasing tendency to ignore their immediate spatial environment for the sake of their digital lives offer evidence contrary to the claim that social media platforms encourage the performance of genuine instances of speech and action and lives lived literally among other humans. Thus, it is unlikely that the modern, highly-digitized human artifice can provide humans with the possibility for immortalization.

5.3 Objection #3: “Modern Humans Do Possess a Trust that the Human Artifice Will Outlive its Mortal Makers”

One final objection to my view — perhaps the strongest objection — posits that humans do in fact possess a trust that the human artifice will outlive its mortal makers. One way of framing this objection is by questioning why Arendt wrote *The Human Condition* in the first place: if Arendt herself did not possess an implicit trust that the human artifice would outlive her, why did she decide to issue an analysis of the modern human artifice and its shortcomings? In writing *The Human Condition*, it appears as if Arendt herself harbored a certain trust in the stability of the human artifice to which she ascribed also to others — a trust on which Arendt herself relied if she ever hoped to incite positive change in social and political institutions.

Another more concrete way of framing this objection is by providing a careful analysis of modern social justice: the very existence of social justice movements across the globe and the seriousness with which they are taken imply that humans do possess some kind of implicit trust in the stability and durability of the human artifice. After all, if the structures that ground, for example, women's oppression, as well as the social relations that supervene on such structures, were not stable and durable, presumably they wouldn't need dismantling in the 'here' and 'now'

by social justice advocates — they would simply crumble over time. This, however, has not been the case. The third objection, then, challenges my claim that modern humans do not trust that the human artifice will outlive the lives of its mortal makers.

There are, I must admit, certain aspects of the human artifice that are durable and stable and are seen as such. The parts of the human artifice that ground, for example, all of the activities associated with information technology seem integral for the functioning of society and as such possess a certain kind of durability other parts do not. In addition, those parts of the human artifice that allow for systemic forms of injustice to arise seem durable as well. A small amount of reflection will yield a plethora of additional examples, implying that the human artifice is stable and durable enough and is seen as such for individuals to achieve political immortality, if they had such an authentic concern to do so.

However, these facts alone are not enough to demonstrate that humans possess a trust that the human artifice will *outlive* its mortal makers. First, it does not matter how stable or durable any part of the human artifice is, if it is not developed, appraised, or utilized for the purpose of achieving political immortality. If correct, my discussion above illuminates the problems associated with utilizing the human artifice authentically. Nevertheless, demonstrating that *parts* of the human artifice are stable and durable is not sufficient for demonstrating that the whole of the human artifice is stable and durable enough to constitute a means of immortalization. For the human artifice to provide adequate means for immortalization, a great number of its parts and the complex relations between these parts must remain strong and relatively unchanging.

In addition, simply appraising the durability and stability of systemic forms of injustice or other social relations does not imply that the human artifice *itself* is durable. Though the human artifice oftentimes mediates the social practices of humans, these practices themselves and the

durability of such practices are logically distinct from the human artifice and its durability. For example, despite the fact that the human artifice has undergone countless transformations by various civilizations throughout human history, according to Simone de Beauvoir, the oppression of women has persisted since the beginning of human existence.¹⁰⁰ Though various forms of such oppression have been *mediated* through parts of the human artifice (e.g. women's clothing, makeup, etc.), the durability of these systemic forms of oppression has much more to do with the durability of the social relations themselves rather than the durability of the tangible objects that mediate such relations. Thus, the durability of social relations and the durability of the human artifice, though connected, are separable, which indicates that demonstrating the durability of social practices is not sufficient for demonstrating the durability of the human artifice.

Finally, even demonstrating that the human artifice is appropriately stable and durable does not indicate that humans are *developing* or *appraising* the human artifice authentically, either. In fact, a careful analysis of the features of social justice movements imply that the human artifice is neither developed nor appraised in the ways proper to an authentic concern for immortality. One of the primary aims of many social justice movements is raising awareness about varying forms of systemic injustice. What this implies is that, according to analyses of these social justice movements, the development of the human artifice that makes possible these injustices does not usually proceed consciously from humans, nor for that matter with any conscious intention of *political immortalization* at all. Since systemic injustice frequently, if not always, occurs without intent, even if the parts of the human artifice that make possible these injustices are rather durable and stable, the existence of systemic forms of injustice *simpliciter* fail to demonstrate that the human artifice is developed or appraised authentically.

¹⁰⁰ Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 301.

6 CONCLUSION

If the responses I have briefly sketched are true, it appears that Arendt's claim is correct: humans in the modern age have, generally, lost an authentic concern for immortality. This is because the social practices that modern humans engage in and the conception of immortality they possess have changed in significant ways in comparison to the ancient Greeks and Romans. In our modern consumer society, the life of *animal laborans* has claimed victory over the *vita activa*, jeopardizing the integrity of the human artifice and political modes of life.

We might view *The Human Condition*, then, partly as analysis and partly as a warning. Arendt's analysis of the development of Western politics is meant to show that, if humans lose an authentic concern for immortality, the tragic loss of the public realm will follow, disturbing both the epistemological foundations humans rely on to make sense of the world and the social foundations that ground human experience, interaction, and politics. Though Western society has been venturing down such a politically-destructive path for some time, the fact that Arendt issues such a warning tells us that not all hope is lost: warnings are no good to those who have no opportunities to change their current situation.

In his essay "The Death of Immortality?," Claude Lefort echoes both Arendt's concern and her hope of humans re-capturing an authentic concern for immortality:

The thought of the men of the nineteenth century was still haunted by a sense of immortality ... Dare we venture to say that the new attitude towards immortality that we find in a small number of nineteenth-century writers helps us to understand the oblivion into which it has fallen in our century? Something that could once be said, provided that it was said emphatically, can no longer be normally said. But what cannot be said is not necessarily dead, and it is not necessarily a sign of degradation.¹⁰¹

Determining whether or not possessing an Arendtian, authentic concern for immortality is in fact desirable is outside the scope of this essay. But, if Arendt is correct, it is imperative that humans

¹⁰¹ Lefort, "The Death of Immortality?," 281.

in Western society reflect on the current status of their social and political institutions. And as technology advances, it may be wise to consider whether or not such human advancements foster genuine intersociality and lay the appropriate foundations for a politically-functional society in the generations to come.

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