The Problem of the Questions “Who am I” and “What am I” in Arendt's
Human Condition and Patočka's Heretical Essays in the Philosophy of History

Alžbeta Hájková
Catholic University of Leuven, Belgium

Abstract

This article explores Arendt’s and Patočka’s accounts of the questions “who am I” and “what am I.” For Arendt, we need to abandon the given meaning of life and pursue excellence through means of action and speech in order to find our “who am I.” When it comes to “what am I,” Arendt is convinced that this is a question one should not ask, since it can lead to dangerous attempts to master the human nature. I argue that not all attempts to understand human nature are dangerous, as some of them aim not at mastering the human nature from within, but creating the political framework that would fit human nature the best. Furthermore, while the totalitarian regimes, through their violent attempts to master the “what am I,” i.e. the human nature, obscured the way to our “who” both Arendt and Patočka suggest that in the modern age, we have abandoned this question – who am I – voluntarily. While Arendt does not offer an explicit way out of the state in which there is no true space for action and speech, Patočka thinks that the way out of such nihilism lies in readoption of the Socratic way of life, which can come about only if one faces the senselessness in its strongest form - the senselessness of war.

Key words: Arendt, Patočka, human nature, “who am I,” action, nihilism
If people today were to ask themselves the question “who am I,” they would often reply with the statement “I am who I am” – the expression of a groundless self-love and unjustified pride, obtained from motivational literature. For Hannah Arendt and Jan Patočka, such an answer is simply grounds for another confirmation of their premise that men of the ‘modern world’ (to use Arendt’s term) gave up on asking themselves who they really are, and consequently lost the chance to find the authentic meaning to their lives. It is not the first time in history that man turned “who am I” into “what am I.” Still, it appears that only in the modern world people voluntarily undertook their transformation into objects. In this paper I will seek to illustrate that despite the fact attempts to answer the question “what am I” are, as Arendt suggests, dangerous, the biggest threat lies in one’s voluntary resignation from the question “who am I,” which is, unlike the former, answerable. However, in order to uncover the means to answer this question – “who am I” – we must first acknowledge the importance of its connotations and not dismiss it with the trivial “I am who I am.”

At the very beginning of her work The Human Condition, Arendt builds on St. Augustine, and paraphrases his important distinction between the aforementioned questions that man can ask himself – “what am I” and “who am I.” Throughout the book, she describes the conditions under which we ask ourselves “whom am I.” Even though a simple answer to this question might be to say “a man,” man is always a conditioned being, and “everything [he] come[s] in contact with turns immediately into a condition of [his] existence.”1 Man is therefore a man always within certain conditions which form his life and pertain to the question of who he is. Reality is shaped by men, and that same reality shapes men. The world is a conditioning force that changes and develops throughout the course of its history, at least the man-made aspects of it. And even if we might be close to it (and in Arendt's view we in fact desire this), men have not yet found the way to completely alter the very condition into which they are born, a condition which is of the earth itself.2 In no way does Arendt believe that the conditions of human existence can answer the question “who am I” fully. They can never explain it in the scientific sense of the word, because we are never conditioned absolutely.3

However, there seems to be one condition of human life which captures our “who am I” the most fully: The sphere of human action. It is through action and speech that one leaves the realm of necessity (which is conditioned by manual labor directed at one’s life-preservation), and steps out of the quiet life to face his equals – “equals” in the sense that they too left the isolation of the private realm in order to ask the question “who am I,” facing one another.4 It was with this question, according to Patočka, that history began, for it signified the ultimate rejection of the meaning of life as simply given. For both Patočka and Arendt, this took place at the formation of the Greek polis. In polis, the individuals confronted one another through means of action and speech under the condition of plurality. Through this action and speech, man truly revealed who he was, distinguished himself from the others, and achieved the excellence that made his own “who am I” extend beyond his own individual existence, and turned it into something immortal. Polis embodied the conditions under which one asked himself “who am I,” for it bore the consequence of losing the seemingly firm ground on which he previously stood. Through this risky questioning, man

2 Ibid., 9 – 10.
3 Hannah Arendt, The Human Condition, 11.
4 Ibid., 32 – 33.
nourished his soul, and as a result, touched upon a new meaning of life lying in the constant search for the truth.⁵

The unpredictability of human action prevents us from foretelling the answer to the question “who am I” with a scientific precision. Nonetheless, according to Arendt, the answer to this question is much closer to our reach than the other question a man might ask himself – “what am I” – which suggests an inquiry into human nature. Arendt tells us that “the sum total of human activities and capabilities which corresponds to the human condition does not constitute anything like human nature.” Not only does she not try to make claims about ‘human nature’ as such, she is also convinced that this is a question one should not ask, for it requires “jumping over our own shadows,” i.e. putting ourselves into a position of superhumans. For if there is such a thing as human nature at all, surely it is only our creator who knows of this essence.⁶ Arendt concludes the question “what am I” unanswerable, since it requires “speaking about ‘who’ as though it were a ‘what’” – once we pose this question, we inevitably put ourselves into the position of someone who looks at other human beings from above.⁷ The danger of making claims about human nature lies precisely in the fact that one takes on the role of a creator. The fact that we will never know whether there is a human nature, or what is it composed of, means that any attempts to be creative here, any effort to impress the claims about human nature onto the human condition, can do more harm than good.

While Arendt deems the “what am I” question as unphilosophical, many of her predecessors thought otherwise. A look at some of the most famous accounts of human nature seems to reveal that any claims on the knowledge of human nature become truly dangerous not when someone merely tries to grasp its essence and then seeks to create a political system – an environment external to this nature – that should presumably fit this nature the best. The real danger arises when someone thinks he knows what human nature is and for this reason, attempts to change it, to strip people of this nature, to be creative in a sense that one masters not only that which surrounds the man, but he wants to change that which in his view is the man, because only the way which is external to man – i.e. the society in which he lives – improves.

In the Hobbesian state of nature, men are of such a nature that they find themselves continually in a perpetual state of war of every man versus every man. However, what we witness in Leviathan is not an attempt to change the dark side of human nature within the commonwealth – the goal is to tame it. The aim is to create a political society where those who fight for glory will be rewarded by the sovereign so that their pride is satiated and they are kept in control, and where those who fight out of fear are given the feeling of security, and the competitiveness of those whose quarrels arose from contest is regulated by the law.⁸

In Locke’s view, opposed to the Hobbesian state of nature, people are perfectly capable to cooperate and to live side-by-side peacefully in the state of nature, for they are naturally bound to take care, not only of their preservation, but also to bear in mind the well being of others. It is the “inconvenience” of the state of nature, i.e. the absence of a superior judge in the cases of

⁷ Ibid., 10.
transgression of the natural law, which results in the creation of the commonwealth. Again, we see that for Locke the inclination for a peaceful life is rooted in human nature, and this belief is reflected on the shape he gives to his commonwealth, where the sphere of civil society and morality remains separate from the magistrate. Thus Locke and Hobbes might be wrong in their claims about human nature, and as a result, the political systems they have created might not suit people the way they imagined. Nevertheless, neither Hobbes nor Locke aspired to change that which was, according to them, in the human nature. They sought the answer to the question “what am I” in order to create a political system in which the “who am I” could best flourish.

Unlike Hobbes and Locke, Rousseau is aware of the danger that the attempts to explore human nature bring, and to some extent he shares Arendt's concern expressed over the question “what am I.” In his preface to Discourse on the Origin and the Foundation of Inequality Among Men, Rousseau makes it clear that it is beyond the capacities of even the greatest minds to fully “disentangle what is original from what is artificial in the real nature of man and to understand well a condition which no longer exists, which perhaps did not exist, which probably never will exist.”

Not only is Rousseau, exactly like Arendt, aware that there might not be any original nature, he also implies that the only proper way to try to identify it is through rational inquiry and meditation, for even the “most powerful sovereigns” and “the greatest philosophers” are not capable to perform “the experiments in the bosom of society” which would shed light on human nature. When it comes down to a search for human nature, Rousseau implies that there are not any experiments that can be considered proper albeit the ones taking place in our mind, an opinion not only of Rousseau, but of Hobbes and Locke as well. For to set up an exploration of human nature in the midst of society means to, in Arendt's words, treat the “who” as a “what.” It requires violation of one of the two basic principles of humanity that Rousseau formulated, as it leads to human suffering, the suffering which comes into play as soon as someone claims not only to know human nature, but also aims at mastering and changing it from the inside.

Totalitarian regimes of the 20th century embodied such an aspiration. Totalitarianism became truly creative, for it is not satisfied with the description of the “what am I” alone, but has the greater desire to master human to the extent that there is no longer any place for the “who am I” question. Under totalitarian rule, there is no longer space left for the unpredictability of human action, unlike in Hobbes or Locke. For them, the political society did not aspire to erase the imperfections of the human nature. Rather, it merely set conditions so that human flaws might be restrained, and justly punished. The situation is different with totalitarianism – it works through a constant and continual movement, which aims at replacing our supposedly flawed nature with the new, perfect one, contorting to the ideals of the particular ideology. The final stage of totalitarianism is where human imperfections need no punishment, because no imperfections exist in the first place.

11 Ibid., preface.
“Who am I” is, according to Arendt, a question to which an answer differs from one individual to another. By trying to make human nature perfectly mastered, uniform, and predictable, totalitarianism obstructs any path to the way wherein one might find his “who am I.” In The Origins of Totalitarianism, Arendt gives an account of what happens to the “who,” to the individual under the totalitarian rule. Yet in the context of this paper the more crucial question is the origin of the desire to eliminate the spontaneity and unpredictability of action. This is a matter on which Arendt sheds light in The Human Condition. She is convinced that just as the polis was a place for action and speech, Plato's Republic was supposed to create a political society where neither of these two get any role. Plato was first to realize the “destructive force” of a “deeper principle” penetrating the Greek society – the principle of a new, unpredictable beginning that each action represents. It is for this reason that Plato tried to extend the rules of the household onto the public realm. In oikos, the action becomes a fabrication or a mere labor and is therefore governable and controllable, and speech is used only instrumentally and turns into “idle talk.” Human affairs become mastered and the master-slave relationship typical for the private sphere is applied to the entire society. “The element of beginning disappears” and “with it the most elementary and authentic understanding of human freedom.” Plato, according to Hegel, saw no other way to deal with the “free infinite personality” hiding behind the Socratic question “who am I,” than to try to repress it, for it was precisely the infinity and the unpredictability of human potential that he deemed dangerous. In a similar fashion, totalitarianism interpreted “action in terms of making,” and attempted to eliminate it through propaganda and force.

Following both Arendt’s Human Condition and Patočka's Heretical Essays in the Philosophy of History, it appears that the true misfortune of our modern age is that there is not any external violent force that would prevent us from returning to the pursuit of the question “who am I.” Yet, we gave up pursuing it. Thanks to this voluntary resignation from the quest for the non-evident truth to our life, we live in conditions that are even worse than those produced by totalitarianism. Under totalitarian rule, the public realm of a true plurality did not exist; in mass culture, people, who abandoned the movement of action, became homos faber who quietly work on their well being and the accumulation of wealth. Such isolation brought the political to cessation. Behavior is substituted for action, because behavior implies a recurring pattern, an end – an end that the spontaneous action can never foretell. Moreover, bureaucracy is substituted for behavior, which gives us the seeming “mastery over circumstances” of formerly spontaneous human interactions. “[The] modern age's conviction that man can know only what he makes” inevitably reduces man to a “what.” However, unlike in totalitarianism, this “what” is no longer confronted as imperfect, and there is no striving

14 Hannah Arendt, The Human Condition, 208.
15 Ibid, 225.
16 G. W. F. Hegel, Elements of the Philosophy of Right, 20.
17 Hannah Arendt, The Human Condition, 196.
18 Ibid, 233.
20 Hannah Arendt, The Human Condition, 228.
for excellence whatsoever. “Individual life again became mortal,” and men succumbed to nihilism.\textsuperscript{21}

For Patočka, the features of human life in the modern world that Arendt describes are the external signs of a deeply rooted nihilism; by “imposing an order on the portion of the world within our reach,” we only confirm Nietzsche’s premise that the general meaning is absent.\textsuperscript{22} The care of one’s soul which created history (and which simultaneously marked the birth of Europe) is gone, and we live in what appears to be a pseudo-prehistorical period. Man, trapped in the cyclical movement of production and deprived of any meaning, returns to the prehistorical ways of pleasure. In hope of escaping the burden of dailiness, he succumbs to the demonic and the orgiastic. However, the freedom that the demonic offers is only ostensible; it is not moving forward, towards the discovery of a new meaning. The demonic is shifting from reality and back, only to make the burden of it even heavier upon returning.\textsuperscript{23} The life reduced to labor, with the occasional escapes to the easy sensual pleasures of the demonic, takes people back to the animalistic existence, it turns them into “herd men,” who do nothing but blink upon hearing the question “who am I.”\textsuperscript{24} Indeed, the state of post-totalitarian Europe is even worse than during the times of oppression and war. Nowadays, there is no force which would, through attempts to master human nature, destroy the path to discovery of our “who.” In the mass culture, resignation from the search for a meaning of life and abandonment of the aspiration to excellence are voluntary. People are not only incapable to restore the path to these things – they are also unwilling to do so.

In light of this, when we return to our initial distinction between the questions “who am I” and “what am I” established by st. Augustine and paraphrased by Arendt, we can see that attempts to answer the latter are as dangerous as giving up on the former. However, following Arendt’s words, we must not forget that unlike the question of human nature, we are not left without the means to answer “who” we are. For Arendt, this means action and speech, which constitute the political. For Patočka, this means a movement of truth represented by the philosopher who rejects the naive and absolute meaning of life, and through this rejection arrives at a meaning which lies in \textit{seeking} the very meaning. Both of these principles merge in the figure of Socrates, who pursued the latter by employing the former. However, unlike in the Greek \textit{polis}, in mass society, contemplation is distrusted and action reduced to mere production.\textsuperscript{25} The question, therefore, is not a matter of \textit{what} the means are, but how they can be reapplied in a society which garnerst hostility towards them.

When we look at Patočka’s account of nihilism, we see that man cannot suffer the trap of dailiness without \textit{any} illusory meaning (which is in this case the demonic) that brings him relief . Furthermore, Arendt tells us that modern man \textit{identifies} production with action. This means that behind his cyclical movement of work, there might be a subtle yet present desire for “permanence and immortality,” but he no longer realizes that “the beautiful and eternal cannot be made.”\textsuperscript{28} Even

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{21} Hannah Arendt, \textit{The Human Condition}, 320; Jan Patočka, \textit{Kaciřské Eseje o Filosofii Dějin}, 66.
\item \textsuperscript{23} Jan Patočka, \textit{Kaciřské Eseje o Filosofii Dějin}, 66 – 67, 87 – 89.
\item \textsuperscript{24} Friedrich Nietzsche, \textit{Thus Spoke Zarathustra}, trans. A. del Caro (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 10.
\item \textsuperscript{25} Hannah Arendt, \textit{The Human Condition}, 290.
\item \textsuperscript{26} Ibid., 303, 322.
\end{itemize}
though *The Human Condition* ends with the “victory of the animal laborans,” Arendt somewhat hesitantly acknowledges that the capacity to act is still within us.\(^\text{27}\) Similarly, Patočka is convinced that philosophy, i.e. the means to answer the “who am I” question, can exist “regardless of the structure of society,” which means that it can reemerge even in the modern age of nihilism.\(^\text{28}\) But how can such a rediscovery of philosophy be brought about? In Arendt’s *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, that which even totalitarian ideology could not control – and which consequently carried the hope for change– was “each new birth.” Every new delivery is a start of “the world anew,” each individual birth embodies precisely that infinite potential which is feared by totalitarianism.\(^\text{29}\) However, in the modern world, the new birth alone does not seem to suffice to overcome the ever-present nihilism. What we need is a *rebirth*. Patočka suggests that such a rebirth occurs when someone faces the senselessness in its strongest form, the sort of senselessness that does not offer any temporary remedies. The senselessness that man experiences in war embodies such a rebirth-inspiring experience, because the immediate contact with war uncovers not only how the war itself lacks any meaning whatsoever, but also how the life one led before the war lacked it. War changes the man. The experience of sheer senselessness allows him to adopt to the way of life in which one is “prepared to give up the hope of a directly given meaning and to accept meaning as a way.”\(^\text{30}\)

This is the way of life of the Socratic *daimon*, of the question “who am I” – the question that stood not only at the beginning of history, but also at the nascence of philosophy and politics, which emerged interdependently. Perhaps there is hope that this interdependence is preserved, and with the reestablishment of the Socratic question, the true public realm of Arendt’s action and speech will rise from the oblivion as well.

We have seen where the question “who am I” stood at the beginning of history, and where it stands in the present. Although attempts to master human nature (i.e., the “what am I”) clearly obstructed the way to answer this question “who am I”, what made us indifferent towards the question completely is the repression coming from within us. While Arendt describes the consequences of this with a striking precision, she does not aspire to give us a solution. Patočka, on the other hand, sees a way out of this miserable state. Still, in his view, the true escape from the misery of senselessness comes through the rebirth experienced under the misery which is ever greater – war. Most of those who survived the great wars of the 20th century, and hence could have the experience Patočka described, are either gone, or on the edge of their lives. Nihilism remains. Thus, the final question for everyone who deems Patočka’s way out of nihilism to be true ought to ask – in spite of the fear it might inspire or that radical shaking which we need in order to rediscover the Socratic question and restart history – is yet to come.

\(^\text{27}\) Ibid., 320.
References


