

# The vita activa: labor, work, and action essay sample



## Introduction:

Since man is a living being with rational faculty, he has to have an active life in order to sustain his survival on earth. For a man to have a productive life, it is important for him to know and understand his basic activities. He must discover the means or tools for his own survival—how to obtain his food, shelter, water, clothing, etc. Most importantly, man must distinguish between the three basic human activities: labor, work, and action. In her thought-provoking book *The Human Condition*, Hannah Arendt analyzed and described the three different types of human activities, the qualities of human behavior, and the concepts of human conditions in relation to the three basic human activities.

In order to better explain the concepts of these activities and their corollary human conditions, Arendt divided human life into two realms: the private realm or site of property, and the public realm, which is common to all people living in a particular society or community. Arendt argued that the public realm is the domain for glory, freedom, and initiation because each community member is involved in political issues or public affairs, such as war, law, education, health care, etc. In contrast, the private sphere is the domain for necessity because it is inherently situated in the “shadowy interior of the household”, which is composed of family members, children, and slaves (Arendt, 1998, p. 58).

All the basic or fundamental human activities concerning the sustenance of human existence operate in the public and private realms. The essential corollaries of these human activities are economy, production,

manufacturing, reproduction, trade, commerce, etc. Arendt introduced the term *vita activa*, which means active life, to explain and to designate the three basic activities of human beings: labor, work, and action. According to her, these are fundamental because each basically relates to the essential conditions of human existence or survival (Arendt, 1998, p. 7).

She defined labor as “ the activity which corresponds to the biological process of the human body,” whose unstructured or unprompted development, sustenance, and eventual demise are essentially connected with the essential requirements generated and inputted into the life cycle process by labor (Arendt, 1998, p. 7). Life is the human condition of labor. On the other hand, she defined work as the “ activity which corresponds to the unnaturalness of human existence,” which is not inherently connected with, and whose transience is not counterweighed by, the species’ habitual human life cycle (Arendt, 1998, p. 7). Worldliness is the human condition of work.

Meanwhile, Arendt (1998, p. 7) defined action as the only human activity that involves a relationship between and among men, and has plurality as its human condition due to the fact that men are social beings that must live collectively on earth. Action is the human activity that is most closely related to the public realm, because it is where men achieve a sense of freedom, glory, and initiation. It is the condition of plurality that makes action related to politics for the very reason that it concerns not man, but men who inhabit the world and live on the earth.

Labor and Life

The vita activa, according to Arendt, always involves unnatural or artificial objects or things which are essentially man-made and men. Since men engage in constant activities to sustain their survival and to improve their human conditions, they have to shape the environment where they live. In the words of Arendt (1998, p. 22), the environment where men live “ would not exist without the human activity which produced it.” Since men live together in a given territory or society, human activities are essential in order to guarantee their existence, establish harmony and order, and improve their social conditions.

Unlike the activity of action, labor does not require the presence of other men. However, Arendt argued that a person who labors in complete isolation is not acting as a human being but as an animal laborans (Arendt, 1998, p. 22). For example, a person building, fabricating, and laboring a realm or territory occupied only by himself would still be a builder or a fabricator, though not homo faber. This is because this type of man would have lost his traits as a human being and, rather, be a divine being or a creator. Thus, this affirms the orthodoxy that man, by nature, is a social animal.

Labor, according to Arendt (Arendt, 1998, p. 79), is cyclical or repetitive and never-ending. This is the reason why it is on top of the hierarchy of human activities. The condition of labor is life itself, as it encompasses all human activities required to maintain life and to ensure man’s existence on earth. Relying on John Locke’s distinction between a laboring human body and working hands, Arendt (Arendt, 1998, p. 79) argued that the word ‘ labor’, which is understood as a noun, never speaks of the outcome of labor or finished product. She concluded that the word ‘ labor’ is a verbal noun to be <https://assignbuster.com/the-vita-activa-labor-work-and-action-essay-sample/>

classified with the gerund. This means that labor has no end, as it is a repetitious human activity.

Man cannot escape labor. Since man is enslaved by necessity, man has to labor all his life, and this process of enslavement is intrinsic in the conditions of human life (Arendt, 1998, p. 80). This affirms the history of slavery wherein men who aspired to achieve freedom from the necessities of life had to enslave those whom they subjected to necessity by means of coercion and force. This explains why slavery was institutionalized in antiquity. Arendt argued that the establishment of slavery was the attempt by domineering men to eliminate labor from the conditions of human life.

Labor involves two subjects: the laborer of the hand or the manual laborer and the laborer of the head or the intellectual laborer. However, Arendt (1998, p. 90) suggested that the tie that binds these two laborers is the laboring process. For instance, an intellectual worker must obtain manual skills and use his hands in order to convert his ideas to a productive object. Everything that is generated through the process of labor is meant to serve the human life. Relying on the philosophy of Locke, Arendt argued that the life process presupposes the necessity of subsisting.

Fertility is the force of life, thus reproduction is needed in order for a living organism to continue its life cycle. The same is true of human beings, as they need to reproduce in order to ensure the continuity of human species on earth. With the advent of technological, economic, and scientific development, labor has become public. The result of this transformation is

the institutionalization of private property that permits men to own land and property, both tangible and intangible.

The acquisition of property is now inherent in our laws and culture because labor is motivated and inspired by the life process itself. In her own words, Arendt (1998, p. 116) commented that in a world of property-owners, it is the world that stands at the heart of human anxiety and care. Today we have a society of laborers, a manifestation that labor entails the underlying significance of life (Arendt, 1998, p. 116). Arendt (1998, p. 131) however criticized Karl Marx's "emancipation of labor", which simply means emancipation from necessity. This Marxist rhetoric is invalid due to the fact that labor is an inherent part of human life.

### Work and Worldliness

It is the work of our hands that constitute the sum total of the human artifice. The finished product of human work represents the value Adam Smith required for commerce and trade, the durability John Locke required for the institution of property, and they affirm man's productiveness. Work is the second in the hierarchy of fundamental human activities. Unlike labor, work has a beginning and end. If labor never designates any finished product or output, work produces or generates a durable artifact, such as a computer, a building, a bed, or a book. Thus, the object of work must embody value and durability in order to benefit man.

Man has to use worldly objects to live a decent and comfortable life. If men did not exploit or used the objects of nature, the latter would ultimately decay. In explaining the concept of work, Arendt (1998, p. 137) discussed <https://assignbuster.com/the-vita-activa-labor-work-and-action-essay-sample/>

the importance of durability, which gives objects their independence from men who made and used them. This means that the things of the world—those objects produced by productive men—are highly essential in alleviating human condition on earth and improving the quality of human life.

Logically, work corresponds to the human condition of worldliness because it is a human-generated process that produces or generates objects that promote human life. In the past, men discovered agriculture that enabled them to till the soil not only to acquire their means of subsistence, but also to set up the earth for the improvement of the world. But in order to remain within the human world, the land had to be cultivated upon time and again.

According to Arendt (1998, p. 139) the process of fabrication lies in reification. Men have to cut trees in order to produce woods for the construction of houses, schools, and apartment and office buildings. In the past, men had to hunt animals in order to survive. Today, raising farm animals to be slaughtered is part of productive human activities. This affirms what Arendt called *homo faber*, or the creator of human tools or objects. In essence, man as a *homo faber* is a destroyer of nature. In creating new objects and discovering new materials for his survival, man assumes the role of a Creator-God. By creating new materials out of a given object, man could then establish a man-made realm only after wiping out a fraction of God-given nature.

Today men were able to shape their society or environment in their own image. We now have technology and new discoveries that significantly

improve human condition and even prolong man's life. Such discoveries as computers, medicines, hybrid cars, cellular phones, solar panels, etc. are a testimony to the importance of human work. The first stage of technological development occurred when the steam engine was discovered, which led to the industrial revolution. The next stage came with the discovery of electricity, which led to new inventions and discoveries. Among the great discoveries during the past century are nuclear technology, new kinds of weaponry, and computer. All of these products of man's productive work significantly improved human condition and served human life.

### Action and Plurality

Unlike labor and work, action, which is the third human activity, inherently takes place in the public realm. The basic condition of both action and speech, which is human plurality, has the two-pronged quality of distinction and equality. Equality enables men to understand each other, to know the history of their ancestors, and to plan for the future and anticipate the necessities of the next generation. Distinction enables men to grasp the significance of speech and action so to make themselves understood.

Arendt (1998, p. 176) argued that man can choose not to labor by forcing other men to be his slaves and not to work and live the life of a parasite, but human conditions dictates that he cannot escape both action and speech. A life without action and without speech has to cease to be human life. Thus, a man needs action and speech to live as a human being. The existence of word and deed enables man to live in the human world. The existence of word and deed is not forced upon men by necessity, like labor, and it is not



coerced by utility, like work. Its inclination originates from the moment man came into this world and to which he responds by producing something new on his own efforts and by relying on his own human ability. Arendt (1998, p. 177) said that “to act” means to begin or to take an initiative, to lead, or to set something into motion. However, this beginning does not refer to the origination of the world, but to the beginning of somebody other than something else. It refers to the beginner himself.

Action exists in the public realm because it is where man feels and gains a sense of glory, freedom, and initiation. This sense of freedom is derived from the very fact that when men meet in public, they exchange views and tackle ideas. Through this free exchange of ideas and opinions, human thoughts and views are gathered and determined free from the restrictions of primal necessities and of private life. In this regard, the essence of freedom in the ancient Greek society was characterized as the capacity to weigh up individuals’ views and discuss issues socially. This is the manner by which the ideals and morals of society are generated and developed and the concept of common good or greater good is adopted or discovered, which forms a rational social standard.

## Conclusion

It is important to understand the meaning and concept of the three fundamental human activities of vita activa—labor, work, and action—in order to avoid confusion and to prevent the dangers that might ensue when they are absorbed into one another. One danger lies in the area of human cognition. In order to think properly, man must understand that terms and

words have specific meaning and concept. In her book Arendt clearly and specifically explained the difference between the three human activities, as well as their relation to each other.

Labor refers to a repetitive and endless process that is required for man's life, while work refers to a specific activity that has a beginning and end and corresponds to the human condition of worldliness. Action is the only activity that involves men and relates to the human condition of plurality. If these terms were used interchangeably as if they had the same concept and meaning, men would not be able to have a clear philosophical and cognitive understanding of the proper requirements of human life, as well as the nature of human condition.

Another possible problem lies in the area of politics. Arendt carefully discussed her disagreement with Karl Marx who believed in the 'emancipation from labor.' She argued that emancipation from labor simply means the artificial emancipation from necessity and consumption. The only political corollary of this doctrine is slavery, because when necessity is banished from human life it would logically mean that everybody has the duty to serve the interest of everybody. When labor is excluded from human life, who would be condemned to engage in any activity necessary to sustain life? Thus, the relationship between the three activities must be carefully understood in order to better understand the human condition.

#### Reference:

Arendt, H. (1998). *The Human Condition*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

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