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AN ECONOMY TO BEGIN WITH: THE POSSIBILITY OF AN ENVIRONMENTAL ETHIC IN THE WORK OF HANNAH ARENDT

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Abstract

Our argument is that Arendt is right to identify “craftsman” economic logic as a key obstacle to justice in modern life. Our analysis hinges not only on a close reading of Arendt’s exploration of economic logic, but also on her sustained focus on the concept of human natality. By associating natality with original translations of nature as natura- to birth or bring forth, our argument is able to draw illuminating links between Arendt’s critique of economic logic and the possibility of an ethical treatment of nature..

This mere existence, that is, all that which is mysteriously given us by birth and which includes the shape of our bodies and the talents of our minds, can be adequately dealt with only by the unpredictable hazards of friendship and sympathy, or by the great and incalculable grace of love, which says with Augustine, ‘Volu ut sis’ (I want you to be), without being able to give any particular reason for such supreme and unsurpassable affirmation.

-Hannah Arendt (1951), The origins of totalitarianism

Volu ut sis: Saint Augustine’s affirmation of being that is at once our highest human good and is at the same time singularly unpredictable and even hazardous, shapes Hannah Arendt’s political theorizing into a characteristically unique but complex approach to social justice. Her thinking does not risk—as some mid-twentieth political thinking does—dismantling metaphysics and universal appeals to the point of eradicating the remnants of optimism that might remain in the unpredictable and hazardous realm of particular human relationships. Rather, her concern for the human capacity to begin captures a profound sense of optimism in the vulnerability of human life and celebrates that tenuous existential condition as the most important characteristic in economic, and, we argue, environmental concerns.

It is well known that Arendt was not concerned with theorizing about wilderness, trees as such, animals, or the allocation of natural

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resources. And yet, our argument is that Arendt's critique of "craftsman economics" and her sustained deployment of the concept of human 'natality' combine to offer a provocative new way of understanding the possibility and significance of relating justly to the environment. Our argument remains concerned with shoring up this possibility across several of Arendt's works rather than showing its role in a single selection from her oeuvre or even in comparing these themes' various functions in her texts as such.

In *The Human Condition*, Arendt sheds light on the danger of applying "craftsman logic" to non-teleological processes (Arendt, 1998)¹. Arendt's contention is that craftsman logic is outstanding where it concerns the creation of products but anathema when applied to human beings; it undermines the distinctness of humans and construes them to be not much different than animals. In this section, we explicate this contention and show its relation to the destruction of the public-political sphere—the only realm for action, the only specifically and necessarily human activity—by way of invasion from the private economic sphere. The invasion reveals further that primacy placed on economic issues not only destroys the possibility of true political thought and action, but is also incompatible with our biological existence.

Craftsman logic can be understood as a productive process, that is, one of several active applications of a certain mode of human thinking. This kind of activity, like all activities, has the potential to dictate how humans interact and how we experience those objects we use and produce in what Arendt calls, with a particular theoretical emphasis, "world."² "World" might generally be defined as the artifice (concrete and abstract) created by humans and the human activities which reflect the existence of that artifice.

Indeed, there is a reciprocal relationship between humans and our world; we create the world and in return, it conditions us. This point is explained concisely by Arendt where she states: "... because human existence is conditioned existence, it would be impossible

... primacy placed on economic issues not only destroys the possibility of true political thought and action, but is also incompatible with our biological existence..

1 Our reading of Arendt's notion of craftsman logic is based in her work, *The Human Condition*, especially Parts III, IV, and V, respectively, *Labor, Work, and Action*. While this theme plays a role in several other of her developed works, such as her chapters on *Thinking and doing*, and *The Will and the modern age* in *Life of the Mind* (1971, 1977; Harcourt Brace & Company), our analysis here is restricted to her formulations of commodification and labor in relation to the interplay between world and Earth and thus remains grounded in *The Human Condition*.

2 This formulation of "world" and "Earth" is a trope familiar to twentieth Century phenomenology, and was initiated primarily by Martin Heidegger's rejections of substance metaphysics in favor of an integrated and interactive rendering of that world in which being finds itself and upon which it depends. For a further investigation of the use of these terms, see Sturdevant, Molly; "Holding Open: an Explication of Heidegger's Aesthetics," *Current Studies in Phenomenology and Hermeneutics*, Volume I, 2001. doi: <http://karljaspers.org/csph/2000/molly.htm>

without things, and things would be a heap of unrelated articles, a non-world, if they were not the conditioners of human existence” (Arendt, 1998)³. We give our world significance by acknowledging it and responding to it, and the world conditions us, giving us the artifice within which we exist. Note that this can be for better or for worse; as we explore the consequences of applying craftsman logic to our interactions with and productions of our world, it is possible that we may not like the artifice within which we find ourselves.

A core concept at work within this concept of world is that of teleology. The Aristotelian tradition has long established that telos indicates the goal or intention of the thing, or rather, the end for which it was intended. If we attempt to consider our developing concept of world teleologically, then we see that it would be difficult to argue that the world at large is headed toward anything like a predetermined goal.

However, we can consider that the activities and entities that constitute the world at any given time are characterized by work, or by craft and production, which is necessarily teleological. The production of a given component of the world (referred to here as craftsman logic) can also be explained in the formula I-W-C where “I” is an idea in the Platonic sense, “W” is the work necessary to convert the idea into a concrete product, and “C” is the finished concrete product (Arendt, 1998)⁴. This logic is so prevalent in the world precisely because it is adaptable and reliable. If the concrete product does not sufficiently match the initial idea, one can go back and alter the work process to produce a more satisfactory product.

Further, once the work process is perfected, one can reasonably assume that if that process is adhered to, the outcome will be the same every time. Indeed, craftsman logic is exactly the kind of thinking that has allowed human cultures to create the artifacts and monuments that inform our historically rich identities, yet, unchecked, it threatens to saturate us with a dangerous tolerance for predictability, a danger to be more fully explored below.

Earth, on the other hand, might be defined as all biological processes prior to, or operative independent of, human goals or ends. Earth is a self-regulating realm that has no pre-determined end goal that orients its activities. There is a reciprocal nature inherent to Earth, similar to that of world but with one poignant difference:

... craftsman logic is exactly the kind of thinking that has allowed human cultures to create the artifacts and monuments that inform our historically rich identities, yet, unchecked, it threatens to saturate us with a dangerous tolerance for predictability.

3 Arendt, Hannah. *The Human Condition* (1958). The University of Chicago Press: Chicago, 1998. p. 9. Hereafter, Arendt, 1998.

4 Arendt, 1998. The formulation here is inspired by Arendt’s sections in Parts V and VI: *Action*, and *The Vita Activa and the Modern Age*, pp. 265-301, where she brings a Platonic notion of an *Idea* to bear on a production schematic that is informed by Marx’s rendering of the process of commodification in *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, (1867). Regnery Gateway: Washington D.C., 1993. pp. 72-97.

while humans create the world and the world conditions humans, there is no actor that drives the dynamic changes within the Earth, but rather, the Earth self-regulates in a cyclical process. Earth conditions itself again and again by producing and reproducing life.

This is to say that while the activities that produce the human artifice—what Arendt calls “work”—are oriented toward a specific predetermined end, Earth processes—what Arendt calls “labor”—are not, but instead are bound by a reproductive, life-giving cycle (Arendt, 1998)⁵. Land worked by a farmer would be an apt illustration of this particular distinction between world and Earth. Such land is largely comprised of biological processes, but to the extent that those processes are maintained by human intervention and aim toward some predetermined goal, they belong to the world (Arendt, 1998)⁶.

Another and more specific example would be to note that tilled acreage in central Illinois that yields corn to be turned into a soda is distinct from a neighboring feral prairie which, overtime, only turns itself into a slightly different feral prairie. That is to say, prairies maintain prairies in order to create the possibility of future prairies while humans maintain cornfields in order to produce say, fuel or soda, that is, in order to produce something according to an end that stands beyond the natural purview of the means. The Earth naturally generates itself as humans create the world and the world conditions humans, and humans often use Earth as a means in this equation.

Arendt’s development of the conceptual schema of Earth and world to showcase the characteristic differences in production can be analyzed further if we consider whether these concepts are metaphorical or physical, or whether such a distinction can even be neatly maintained. Certainly, given the descriptions above, it is apparent that once the human world interacts with the Earth, any biological processes involved can become part of the human artifice and lose their Earthly nature to some degree.

But there are many examples of phenomena that cross the boundaries of world and Earth, and indeed, operate to some extent in both realms. Human beings are the epitome of these confounding examples, as we are simultaneously bound by both our biological necessities and the artificial demands of the world; we are both biological and artificial. Our biological lives are conditioned by the artificial world that we have created. So if the concepts of world and Earth are physical rather than metaphorical, there ought to be some defining characteristic that determines to which realm an entity belongs. Given the descriptions of world and Earth above, we

5 Arendt, 1998; pp. 88, 136.

6. Arendt, 1998; pp. 138-139.

might posit that the defining characteristic in determining whether an entity pertains to the world or the Earth is whether or not—or to what extent—that entity is able to maintain itself or self-regulate.

At one end, once a biological entity is dependent upon (as opposed to interdependent with) inputs from the human artifice for its continued existence, that entity is artificial and part of the human condition. In this situation which we might call artificial hegemony, the entity's biological life becomes almost incidental and primacy is given to the end goal prescribed for it by human goals. Like a car on an assembly line, biological entities guided by artificial hegemony do not regulate themselves in any meaningful way but instead are guided through their lives by predetermined human processes.

On the other hand, if a biological entity receives no input whatsoever from humans and maintains itself interdependently with the help of other strictly biological entities, that body belongs to the Earth. In this case, which we could call biological autonomy, the human condition would have no consequences to such biological bodies. Therefore, these concepts are very much physical in nature; we can see to what extent an entity is worldly or Earthly (artificial or biological) simply by removing the human artifice from the system. If a biological system would collapse or drastically change without artificial inputs, that system can be characterized as worldly.

The logic of capital as it is understood by Karl Marx—a figure with a prominent place in Arendt's thinking in *The Human Condition*—assists this analysis insofar as Marx's construal of the "metamorphosis of a commodity" allows us to draw our attention deeper into Arendt's concern regarding this worldly aspect of craftsman logic. In *Capital* (1867), Marx famously points out that traditionally, money was used as a means to an end (Marx, 1993)⁷. This can be expressed in the formula C-M-C where "C" is a commodity produced by a worker which is brought to market and sold for money ("M"), in order to purchase other commodities ("C") that the worker does not produce.

This model is typically associated with a subsistence lifestyle wherein a worker produces enough of a given commodity to be able to "reproduce" himself in order to continue working; the goal of this model is the condition of the possibility of work, which is not an end so much as a necessary phase in a cycle. Due to its cyclical nature, this process has more in common with a biological, Earthly process than an artificial human process.

⁷ Marx, Karl. *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, (1867). Regnery Gateway: Washington D.C., 1993. pp. 72-97. Hereafter, Marx (1993).

As we have discussed above, the Earth is characterized by the cyclical reproduction of life as opposed to the ends-oriented production of the artificial world. For that reason, it is not illogical to consider this model a labor model as opposed to a work model; humans meet their biological needs by producing the world, which is to say, they work in order to meet their labor-needs. They are in this sense related to their work, not isolated from it by virtue of producing parts or products that bear no relevance to their needs.

While the goal of the C-M-C model is to meet biological needs in order to continue producing the world, the logic of capital has an all together different goal. The logic of capital can be explained by the formula M-C-M' where "M" is an initial sum of money, "C" is a commodity purchased with that money, and "M'" is a new sum of money acquired upon selling that commodity at a higher price. The goal of this model is to produce the condition of the possibility to make more money.⁸ Since the product of M-C-M' is only a favorable state for making more money, if strictly adhered to, this model represents the possibility of an unlimited accumulation of money.

To conclude, we observe that what the logic of capital represents is an invasion of the cyclical/self-regulating processes—labor and action—by a teleological process—work. Once the logic of capital, which operates in the private-economic sphere, takes primacy over Earth and the public-political sphere, it takes on the role of a reduction of all processes to their ability to contribute to the accumulation of monetary wealth.

Given the social-ecological crisis taking place in contemporary society, our focus is to push this application of Arendt's thinking toward the destruction and devaluation of the Earth.⁹ As we have shown above, the Earth comprises the biological processes that make human activities—work and action—possible; without an abundant Earth, there can be no human artifice. By making the accumulation of monetary wealth the primary guiding force of "rational" human activity, we have effectively devalued the diversity

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⁸ Marx, 1993; pp. 108-109.

⁹ That such a social, ecological and economic crisis obtains is supported in a recent and illuminating work on Arendt's notion of aesthetic judgment. In *Our Sense of the Real: Aesthetic Experience and Arendtian Politics* (Cornell University Press: Ithaca, 1999), Kimberly Curtis writes that, "The proto-typically modern experience is one of being in the midst of natural and other inexorable processes. What meaning things bear is derived from their function in the overall process. Individual acts are dwarfed, stripped of their dignity, power, and meaningful place in a wider world. Hence the process character of the modern age destroys the conditions for the appearance of human particularity and for collective, meaning-giving acts. It makes the insult of oblivion a widely suffered experience." (Curtis, 1999), p. 77

of goods and services provided by the Earth and replaced them in favor of the goods and services that can contribute to the accumulation of monetary wealth.

By way of a continuing example, ignoring the Earth's capacity to create bountiful prairieland without any external inputs, we create vast corn monocultures that demand continuous external inputs and that are prone to widespread diseases in order to create the condition of the possibility of making more money. Where the Earth produces abundant life, a world guided by the logic of capital produces money at an unsustainable ecological cost.¹⁰ Acknowledging the fact that the Earth provides free services that would be impossible, or at least not worth the energy expended, for a human to replicate, we can conclude that under the logic of capital humans attempt to operate at a loss without actually losing.

Because Arendt's work primarily focuses on the invasion of the public-political sphere by craftsman logic, she does not explicitly speak to the invasion of Earth by world in her corpus. But we can at least glean from her analysis of money that the problem is not "world" nor "Earth" but the invasion of Earth by world.¹¹ Given this core problem we might begin to grapple with solutions. First, it might seem initially reasonable to consider completely separating the world from the Earth. The National Park Service, environmental advocacy groups, and endangered species protection could be seen as evidence of this type of thinking already at work in our society.

While these steps are absolutely necessary to help bring the Earth toward an even keel with world, such a separation does not have a realizable logical end. What this approach suggests is a sphere for human activity and a sphere for Earth processes, but the

... under the logic of capital humans attempt to operate at a loss without actually losing.

¹⁰ Evidence is boundless and increasing, but beyond the purview of this paper to be treated thoroughly. We recommend three relevant and recent sources which ground this view in sociological and scientific studies. Pfeiffer, Dale Allen. *Oil Food and the Coming Crisis in Agriculture*, New Society Publishing: Canada, 2006. McKibben, Bill. *Eaarth*, Henry Holt & Company: New York, 2010. Shiva, Vandana. *Biopiracy*, South End Press: Boston, 1997.

¹¹ Kimberly Curtis supports this contention in a way that underscores our own emphasis on the notion of "world" in the deteriorating logic of craftsman economics. She writes, "The deepest sign of the modern age is loss of the condition of the world understood as both the subjective-in-between that intangibly forms between people who share a common life and the thing-quality or objective-in-between. The hallmark of Arendt's concept of the world is that, in both of these senses, people are at once related and separated. 'The world' stands for the existential dimension of spatiality. By pressing people indistinguishably together, the modern is an assault on the existential dimension of spatiality in its objective and subjective senses.[...] To grasp the world in its aftermath required disentanglement 'from all involvement in and concern with the close at hand and withdraw[al] to a distance from everything near' [HC, 1998; p. 251]. Each event brought world alienation because each wither entailed a loosening of attentiveness to place or to the presence of particular others close at hand. The self was required to habitually rip itself from its embeddedness in the world of things and others in its local and immediate world." (Curtis, 1999). pp. 77-78.

fact of the matter remains; humans derive their biological livelihood from the Earth and separated from it, humans cannot satisfy their biological needs, nor can they construct the world. Thus, to the extent that humans are biological creatures and worldly creatures, there must be some type of interaction between world and Earth—a coexistence.

Offering an example of such an interaction, but not as if presenting something new or contrived, Wendell Berry has suggested that, “The goal is a harmony between the human economy and nature that will preserve both nature and humanity, and this is a traditional goal” (Berry, 2010)¹². Given Arendt’s framework, this idea has incredible implications, proving that what Berry writes here is not just a naïve sentiment. Indeed, the “preserving harmony” to which he refers has existed traditionally within various human communities; the idea of humans interacting with nature in a sustainable way is not new.

Deploying Arendtian terms, we might say that what makes the contemporary situation different is that we (now) have begun to rationalize the plunder of the Earth; we have statistical evidence of our destruction of it. Whereas five hundred years ago, humans may have believed there to be a relatively infinite source of wealth provided by nature, today we clearly and alarmingly see, by way of the depletion of geological resources, loss of animal species, and severe deforestation, that the Earth is rather finite and we are destroying it. Certainly, every life form—human, animal, vegetable, fungus, etc.,—creates the condition of the possibility of their own livelihood by modifying their local environment in one way or another—every creature labors in its own way so as to go on living—but what separates humans from those other life forms is that humans can and must represent their activities to themselves.

For Arendt, it is this capability and necessity that is distinctly human and in fact the most human activity there is—action. In the past, this has meant animistic, pagan or otherwise nature-centered spiritual practices. Presently, in a time where global ecological crisis is well-studied, this conscious awareness of the condition of the Earth is connected to action, for better or for worse.

As an example of the “for worse,” consider that our knowledge of Earth’s demise may inspire only a highly scientific and statistical economic justification of why we must go on destroying the Earth. We might call this act of justification a kind of “myside bias” in which humans favor the evidence that confirms whatever beliefs about the environment support their “side” or “view” of things, or

... what separates humans from those other life forms is that humans can and must represent their activities to themselves.

¹² Berry, Wendell. *What are People For?* Counterpoint Press: Berkeley, 1990, 2010. Hereafter, Berry, 2010.

worse, their end or purpose for things. Humans simply observe that if we destroy the Earth at the expense of other life forms, subsistence cultures, and natural self-regulating systems, we can increase our bottom line and have computers in our pockets.

Thus, our sheer observation of the process of production does not yet constitute a ground for ethical agency. What criteria might be developed, then, that can transform this awareness into the right kind of action, namely just action which is deeply in touch with a consciousness of the need to begin renewing Earth?

If action is essential, but it runs the risk of a myside bias, Wendell Berry averts this risk by offering a way to be actively conscious of the environment and to represent it to himself as we must, without needing to confirm a belief or justify an end at all. Berry represents human impacts on the Earth to himself by viewing land use as a conversation. Dovetailing nicely with Arendt's own framework, this conversation could be considered to be that between world and Earth. It could be said that the activity of each allows itself to countenance the spontaneity and unpredictability found in the other, rather than avoid it, invade it, or attempt to capitalize on it.

In Berry's mind, this way of representing the interaction between world and Earth looks very much like a simple human conversation. "In a conversation, you always expect a reply. And if you honor the other party to the conversation, if you honor the otherness of the other part, you understand that you must not expect always to receive a reply that you foresee or a reply that you will like" (Berry, 2010)¹³. Another possible enactment of this integration of Berry's and Arendt's thinking could involve humans doing work, (but not merely labor), such that we produce on or with the land, and then observe how the Earth responds to it, beginning work anew with the response of the Earth in mind.

In this conversational model, the Earth and the world disclose themselves unto one another. In a sense, this is action on a different metaphysical level with both world and Earth as agents. World and Earth would be in continuous conversation guided by nothing more than maintaining the condition of the possibility of the conversation. Rather than being guided by mere quantitative production of goods to which the worker will not relate, or the production of increasingly devalued money, this model is characterized by the flourishing of both artificial life and biological life. Life flourishes because the condition of its possibility is desired.

This mutual, reinforcing affirmation of being is the same as that announced by Saint Augustine and prevalent in Arendt's earliest writings: "I want you to be." The logic of capital says, "I want me to

¹³ Berry, 2010; p. 209.

be,” and demands that we pretend to feel safe in the dangerously unnatural predictability and isolation afforded by late capitalist economic models. This affirmation of the other’s singularity is one aspect of Arendt’s ability to provide a resistance to craftsman logic.

Thus far, we have argued that craftsman logic—an Arendtian way of conceptualizing the same goals in mind that characterize late capitalist models of production and their effects on modern life—is indeed anathema to human well-being. We have also anticipated possible modes of response and repair through Berry’s representation of the world-Earth relationship as a kind of conversation which embraces the spontaneous, even (as Arendt would say) hazardously unpredictable but essential interaction between beings. In what follows, we will pursue this line of thinking alongside Arendt’s exploration of the theme of natality, thus further illuminating the connection we perceive between Arendt’s economical critique and a kind of environmental ethic.

While it is generally understood that the origins of the notion of natality begin in the work of Augustine, and consequently for Arendt in her dissertation on the concept of love in Augustine’s work,¹⁴ for our purposes, we will look directly into the appearance of natality in those of Arendt’s later works which bear greater relevance to the present argument. An analysis of a key passage from *The Human Condition* is critical for launching an introduction to Arendt’s notion of natality. In her chapter on Action, Arendt writes:

To act, in its most general sense, means to take an initiative, to begin (as the Greek word *archein*, ‘to begin,’ ‘to lead,’ and eventually ‘to rule’ indicates), to set something into motion (which is the original meaning of the Latin *agere*). Because they are initium, newcomers and beginners by virtue of birth, men take initiative, are propelled into action. [Initium] ergo ut esset, creates est homo ante quem nullus fuit (‘that there be a beginning, man was created before whom there was nobody), said Augustine in his political philosophy. This beginning is not the same as the beginning of the world; it is not the

14 In her 1929 doctoral dissertation entitled, *Love and Saint Augustine*, Arendt writes, “To put it differently, the decisive fact determining man as a conscious, remembering being is birth or ‘natality,’ that is, the fact that we have entered the world through birth.” Arendt, Hannah. *Love and Saint Augustine*. Julius Springer: London, 1929. Reprinted and edited by: Vecchiarelli Scott, Joanna, and Chelius Stark, Judith. University of Chicago Press: Chicago, 1996), p. 51.

beginning of something but of somebody, who is a beginner himself (Arendt, 1998)¹⁵

In this passage, Arendt could be said to offer criteria for what renders human consciousness and representation of world-Earth interaction just; action must not be simply any movement or any decision, but it must begin, it must lead, and it must do this in a way that covets the beginnings of “somebodies,” rather than “somethings.”¹⁶ Connecting action to *agere*, Arendt exposes the etymological significance of the agent. To truly act, to be an actor in one’s environment with others, one must begin, lead, and be essentially an agent of further action, never the end or the force of resistance to the actions of others.

This kind of beginning, which always unfolds in further beginnings, also manifests in the condition of every human’s having-been-born. Arendt writes, “With word and deed we insert ourselves into the human world, and this insertion is like a second birth, in which we confirm and take upon ourselves the naked fact of our original physical appearance” (Arendt, 1998)¹⁷.

Nativity characterizes the condition of being human, more so than any existentialist fatality or mortality might tempt us to think. Arendt’s writing leaves open the possibility that this notion of nativity has what we might call interdisciplinary reach. It is not a purely economic, purely sociological, or metaphysical solution. She writes:

The miracle that saves the world, the realm of human affairs, from its normal “natural” ruin is ultimately the fact of nativity, in which the faculty of action is ontologically rooted. It is, in other words, the birth of new men and the new beginning, the action they are capable of by virtue of being born (Arendt, 1998)¹⁸

¹⁵ Arendt, 1998; p. 177.

¹⁶ Curtis’s analysis on this same point is again illuminating. She cites Arendt, who writes: “What saves the act of beginning from its own arbitrariness is that it carries its own principle within itself, or, to be more precise, that beginning and principle, principium and principle, are not only related to each other, but are coeval” (Arendt, Hannah. *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 1951; p. 212), and adds the following interpretation: “Insofar as this principle of way of beginning inspires those who come after, there is authority, a perseverance in time that occurs not through coercion and violence but through an obedience in which we retain our freedom.” (Curtis, 1999; p. 109).

¹⁷ Arendt, 1998; pp. 176-177.

¹⁸ Arendt, 1998; p. 247. Peg Birmingham’s analysis of this passage is excellent. In her gloss, Birmingham explores the ways in which this same passage owes to Montesquieu. In this connection, Arendt’s notion is shown to be truly ethical, for it bears both *spirit* and

Rather than countenance the “ruinous” condition of our mortal being, Arendt demands that we understand our condition as one of not only having been born, but as thereby capable of renewing and beginning, qua human beings. From these insights, we may conclude that to be an agent of renewal is to live in intimate proximity to the condition of one’s own being. It is not, then, a task. There is no insurmountable difficulty or even a change required of persons being called upon to renew—that is, we could say, to be environmentally ethical—but rather, such agency defies the most prominent argument of a late capitalist economy, namely, that such an economy is itself inevitable, or that it takes care of itself. Only human agency is inevitable; human action cares for itself.¹⁹

To illuminate this point, we may observe a striking resemblance to Berry’s notion that we (humans) can represent the Earth to ourselves through thinking of our interactions with it as a conversation. The likeness is found in that visage of unpredictability which Berry prizes and which is also without a doubt a component not only of birth, but of the continuous assertion of each human itself and of its desires that others also be, or begin. In her excellent analysis of this unpredictable aspect of natality in Arendt’s work, Peg Birmingham has observed the following:

Indeed this event has the character of a ‘startling unexpectedness.’ ...The “who” does not possess an enduring fixed nature but is instead inherently marked by contingency and unpredictability. Arendt’s ontology, therefore, does not describe an immutable order of essences. It does not seek enduring truths upon which to ground both thought and action; it does not posit a metaphysical notion of human nature or subjectivity in which human rights are inalienably inscribed. Instead, it is rooted in an event that provides the arche and principium of human action. By articulating this principium, Arendt does

... our condition as one of not only having been born, but as thereby capable of renewing and beginning, qua human beings.

ethos. See: Birmingham, Peg. *Hannah Arendt and Human Rights: The Predicament of Common Responsibility*, Indiana University Press: Bloomington, 2006; p. 12.

¹⁹ Berry’s conversational spontaneity and Arendt’s notion of natality as originally human and anti-teleological is further evident where she distinguishes between poiesis and praxis, meaning, as Birmingham notes, “the ‘in-order-to’ and the ‘for-the-sake-of.’” Birmingham’s reading of these sections is illuminating. She writes: “Activities of poiesis (making) are guided by principles that can be fully inscribed in what results from the activity. For example, principles of good craftsmanship can be used to make a table; these principles are inscribed in the completed table and remain so after the activity of making is finished. This is not the case with principles of action. The inexhaustibility of these principles entails that they can never be inscribed in any concrete action. Principles of action inspire. They move us to act for the sake of the principle. They are manifest in the act as long as the activity endures, but no longer.” (Birmingham, 2006; p. 15).

not give us an ontological politics; rather, she provides an ontological foundation for human rights (Birmingham, 2006)²⁰.

Birmingham here contends that the ontological ground of Arendt's notion of natality is neither purely metaphysical, nor even political. This supports our assertion that the kind of ethics that is emerging in Arendt's work, and which seeks to avoid the pitfalls of craftsman economy, is not itself a member of a traditionally defined discipline or even mode of specific political thinking. It is not entirely social, it is not purely philosophical or metaphysical, it is not a non-theoretical call to action, nor could this emergent ethics be understood adequately through ecology alone.

What Arendt seems to offer then, alongside Berry's solution, is the opportunity to engage that original condition of being human by enacting one's own capacity to begin, *however that may manifest*, or, in whatever form of agency one might feel most apt. Moreover, it means that whatever particularities manifest, all actions will be ethical insofar as they desire the being and beginning of the other, which appears in its own way, and cannot be engineered to be predictable. Any action that bears these qualities would be one that we might call just.

That such an action is precisely natal is a compelling description ethically, and also etymologically. This ability to birth, begin or run a course of renewal has in fact translated early deployments of the Latin roots for natura. The first etymological gloss of the word "nature" in the Oxford English Dictionary Complete Text introduces the term as follows: "[a. Fr. Nature (12th c.), ad. L. natura, birth, constitution, character, course of things, etc., f. nat-, ppl. stem of nasci to be born. The native English word is KIND sb.]."²¹ Such an action might belong ontologically, therefore, to both world and Earth. That is to say, the natural action of both human ("to be born") and non-human biological entities ("constitution of things"), could be said to share in common this impetus towards beginning.

What these beings present and begin is not just any event, but themselves, their "character" or "kind." Action, viewed through this *natural* and natal aspect, may be ontologically rooted in the public and the private realms, and in Earth and world alike, but this does not indicate that Arendt argued for a merging of the political with the natural, in the sense that we might argue directly from a biological condition towards claims about what is just.

²⁰ Birmingham, 2006; p. 12.

²¹ The Compact Edition of The Oxford English Dictionary, Complete Text Reproduced Micrographically; Volume I: A-O. Oxford University Press: Oxford, 1987. p. 2003.

Here, the complexity of Arendt's economic critique and her discussion of natality manifests, for we note that while we are well within the purview of Arendt's claims to assert that this kind of action that begins with both Earthly and worldly action is the very condition of being human, and in this sense it seems we might describe it as "natural," we must also attend to Arendt's careful rejection of any sort of political naturalizing.

Birmingham has also addressed this issue thoroughly, noting that Arendt's notion of natality is not strictly or merely biological, but it is absolutely ontological, whether this ontology manifests in political action, actual birth, or as a linguistic act. Birmingham has pointed out that natality is not entirely reducible to the physical event and has shown that Arendt frequently asserts that "... physical birth is from the outset inseparable from a 'linguistic birth' that renders it impossible to reduce the event of natality to a physical biological event" (Birmingham, 2006)²². As such, Arendt does not limit the ability to begin to any particular biology, but to the condition of human action and being as such.

What Arendt does offer is natality as a resistance to the unchecked force of craftsman economic logic that abhors "natural" and "natal" spontaneity and distinction while privileging teleological, uniform production. This is most evident again in *The Human Condition* where Arendt develops this linguistic aspect of natality as the one through which we reveal each other, and even desire the others' revelation. "Speech and action reveal this unique distinctness. Through them, men distinguish themselves instead of being merely distinct; they are the modes in which human beings appear to each other, not indeed as physical objects, but *qua* men" (Arendt, 1998)²³.

The danger of not speaking and acting is that a human become isolated, even under the auspices of being stalwartly independent or individualistic. Arendt contends further that, "A life without speech and without action...is literally dead to the world; it has ceased to be a human life because it is no longer lived among men. (Arendt, 1998)²⁴. We can see then, that the engagement of one's natural (but not biologically limiting) condition of being able to initiate, to begin, to speak, and to desire the same of others is precisely what Berry has in mind with his conversational model, and what Arendt makes the center of her argument for human rights.²⁵ But we have

²² Birmingham, 2006; p. 17.

²³ Arendt, 1998; p. 176.

²⁴ Arendt, 1998; p. 176.

²⁵ Birmingham notes that, "Certainly Arendt does not waver from her claim that the birth of the 'who' is a linguistic event: 'The point is that the manifestation of the 'who' comes to pass in the same manner as the notoriously unreliable manifestation of ancient oracles, which,

yet to fully realize how this kind of action (not just any action), could be said to be the right kind of thinking for an interdisciplinary, but specifically environmental ethic.

Towards concluding, and towards realizing the ways in which Arendtian action is environmentally ethical, we observe that our analysis thus far has shown that acting justly requires us to lead, to begin, and to be responsive. To be able to witness that which births and begins, we must fully sense the world which is the context in which these events can occur. This is a call towards being able to countenance our actual environs, or simply, our surroundings.

Kimberly Curtis confirms this argument in her writings on Arendt's lectures on Kant's political philosophy. Curtis explicates one of Arendt's central adaptations of Kant's notion of judgment and its bearing on her own understanding of political action. Citing from Arendt's original lectures, Curtis writes:

Through "sheer force of imagination," we re-create in representative thinking the rich phenomenality of the world, or, as Arendt puts it, "the space that is potentially public, open to all sides." And this requires "our whole soul apparatus." It requires that we encounter and be responsive to the way we might see, experience and feel from the particularity of others' places in the world, that we embrace their encroachment (Curtis, 1999)²⁶.

Embracing others' "encroachment" resonates with the notion of responsiveness to one's environs. A sense of place, that originary acknowledgment that one is "here" and thus enmeshed in a web of Earth-world conversing without which one could not truly live (in speech and action), is the very beginning of any environmental ethic. It shares in natality, but not in nativity or nativism.

The openness that Curtis uses to describe Arendt's notion of public space is a being-open that encounters not only others but also their sense of place, their own unique sense of the context in which we share. To clarify, this indicates support for our contention that

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according to Heraclitus, 'neither reveal nor hide in words but give manifest signs.' [...] Though this linguistic birth, humans become political kinds of beings. Arendt cites Aristotle's definition of man as *zoon logon ekhon*, one for whom exist[ence] is 'a way of life in which speech and only speech made sense.' [Human Condition, p. 27]. This linguistic birth is the birth of the 'who'; that is, the birth of the unique self. Thus, the event of linguistic natality is the birth of the unexpected and the new. In other words, the birth of the political self is the birth of the unexpected word." (Birmingham, 2006; p.24).

26 Curtis, 1999; p. 119. Curtis cites from: Arendt, Hannah. Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy. Edited by Beiner, Ronald, University of Chicago Press: Chicago, 1982; pp. 43, 74.

nativity is an affirmation of others in their differences and newness, a sense that we share an evolving and changing, but sustainable and intelligible place. One must not be born in the place to speak and act in it as a full member of its community; one must simply be (and always already is) born.

The biological fact of birth cannot be reduced to itself or to a particular biological group, but the event does inform the political agency of every human.²⁷ To speak and act environmentally, or simply, with meaningful agency, requires nothing for which humans do not inherently bear a capacity. Speaking and acting with a deep awareness of place calls humans to thrive in a mutually affirming community of persons able to sensually and sensibly countenance the particulars of the Earth in which world is constantly retreating and appearing.

In her analysis of Arendt's descriptions of the public and private realms, Curtis affirms the critical importance of promoting and increasing our ability to sense the context in which we act. She writes, "The deepest essence of the public realm, then, is that it is the communicative site in which we give birth, though our own retrospective and prospective responsiveness, to the phenomenal richness of our shared world" (Curtis, 1999)²⁸.

This "phenomenal richness" is exactly what is lost in the craftsman's economic logic. Even the botanical diversity lost to the monoculture crop serves an example of the way in which a teleological economy that uses both persons and other entities as means to ends that are not only other than themselves, or harmful to or inaccessible to themselves, are harbingers of obscurity. They obscure phenomenal richness the very moment they fear rather than desire to receive Earth's wondrous threat of particularity and spontaneity.

Not only is Earth lost in this economy, but world as well. Curtis' analysis of Arendt concurs: "In the most essential sense, Arendt's thinking bends us toward loss of meaningfulness as the answer to

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²⁷ Birmingham unpacks the Heideggerian influences on this notion in a way that adds further support to our argument that Arendt has yielded a kind of ethics that is concerned for its surroundings, or environs, and is thus environmental. She writes, "[...] Heidegger offers a way to think the materiality of the political body that disallows any kind of organic fantasy. Raumllichkeit denotes our embodied spatiality. We are, therefore, embodied beings, always already immersed and involved in the world. The question of the place of our embodiment, however, is not a question of a corporeal thing present-at-hand. Being-alongside is an embodied 'here' that is also 'there': Dasein understands its 'here' in terms of its environmental 'yonder'. The 'here' does not mean the 'where' of something present-at-hand but rather the 'whereat' (Wobei) of deserverant Being-alongside together with this deserverance." [Heidegger, Martin. Being and Time, trns: John Macquarie and Edward Robinson, Harper & Row: New York, 1962; p. 142]." Birmingham, 2006; p. 30.

²⁸ Curtis, 1999; p. 113.

the question of what liability we suffer in enacting oblivion toward others and thus proliferating loneliness” (Curtis, 1999)²⁹. Arendt’s Augustinian assertion that our desire should be to act such that others may also act, *Volo ut sis*, and Berry’s call for a kind of conversation that is able to countenance the other as much as present the self anew, are to our mind ethical exemplars of the antidote to this proliferation of worldly loneliness.

That such oblivion be remedied by embracing our own natality is exactly the kind of action needed for an ethic that will be, properly speaking, environmental. It will be environmental because this kind of bringing-forth, or acting, encourages a sense of place, a sense of particularity, and a practice of witnessing both Earth and world in consort with one another. The environment is not a thing, but rather a stage with which we perform our uniqueness and our plurality, and which itself appears and retreats in ways that we must sense and respond to.

Such an Arendtian model, we hold, is ideal not just for an environmental ethic, but also for a transformative economic model.³⁰ In anticipation of further developments of such a model, here we will only point out that such a model would be transformative and renewing in the sense that it would dismantle craftsman-style abandonment of beings in the unseen, unspoken isolation that prevents real communication and action from taking place, and worse, prevents human beings from taking joy in their environs and wanting to participate in it. Such an environmentally ethical economy would not decidedly be socially or environmentally oriented, for the segregation of these terms is overturned in Arendt’s analysis of Earth and world. It would be essentially an integration of disciplines, fundamentally human, and ontologically founded.

To cast it economically, the economy we must begin with now—in the wake of the retreat of craftsman logic—must be one which initiates our originary desire for the spontaneous, diverse, local environs without which we could not present our own selves. Said another way, an Arendtian environmental ethic demands that we

... this kind of bringing-forth, or acting, encourages a sense of place, a sense of particularity, and a practice of witnessing both Earth and world in consort with one another.

²⁹ Curtis, 1999; p. 153.

³⁰ In another formative work from Arendt’s oeuvre, she enigmatically asserts that the criteria which mark an act as just are both felt aesthetically by the agent, as well as witnessed, if not judged, by those closest in our communities. Such criteria square nicely with the demands of an environmental ethic. She writes, “[...] [the] criterion for action will not be the usual rules, recognized by multitudes and agreed upon by society, but whether I shall be able to live with myself in peace when the time has come to think about my deeds and words. Conscience is the anticipation of the fellow who awaits you if and when you come home.” Arendt, Hannah. *The Life of the Mind*, Volume I (1971). Harcourt Brace & Company: New York, 1978; p. 191.

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