Hannah Arendt’s Existential Form Of Political Philosophy

Hannah Arendt’s existential form of political philosophy are individuals having the ability to live politically with other individuals in a democratic society. Arendt introduces new ways of accounts for human action through three key forms of activity — labour, work and action. Arendt focuses on the idea of ‘natality’ which is brought about by authentic action. Authentic action involves an individual, other individuals and a common shared goal or objective reality. By having individuals work together towards a common goal, a ‘web of relationships is formed. But how does one reveal ourselves with authentic action? According to Arendt, one of the most direct ways is through speech. Using speech allows individuals to ‘disclose’ their own ideas and publicly share with other individuals in a ‘space of appearing’. Ultimately, authentic action is undoubtedly linked with politics and power. When a group of individuals work together towards a common goal, it changes the society and how it works, it gives the people power to change and begin anew. But as according to Arendt, genuine, authentic politics has disappeared, which to an extent is accurate as nowadays people do not freely take action but instead take account into work and labour issues.

The basis of Arendt’s account of human action is her categorising the 3 forms of activity — labour, work and action. Labour being an individual’s most basic needs; work is the activities that contribute to building our world, it outlives the worker and action is where individuals freely express themselves through speech and action, with other individuals. Action being the most important form of activity as it brings about change, newness and as Arendt calls it ‘natality’. But authentic action as mentioned always involves not only an individual, but other individuals and a common matter. It is the power to be able to act together and transform our world, or at least try to transform our world. This is most commonly seen in revolutions, protests, mass civil disobedience movements, etc. Through participating in these activities, people form a ‘web of relationships where they form links based on human freedom, a political form of life. This can be seen through massive protests happening throughout the world right now, namely the Hong Kong Water Revolutions, the Climate Strike, Catalonia protests, etc. All these protests are individuals forming a political ‘web of relationships as they utilise speech and action and are all working towards a common goal that would bring about natality if succeeded. A political form of life is starkly different from a group formed based on labour or work. A group formed based on labour would be like individuals who joined Fight Club and later Project Mayhem in David Fincher’s Fight Club, all individuals have lost their uniqueness that makes them man, they are nothing but a ‘human herd’, they are inauthentic. As stated in Fight Club, “You are not special. You're not a beautiful and unique snowflake…”, members of Fight Club have all been de-individualised and told they are all the same. A group formed based on work would also be similar to a ‘labour’ group as while they are working towards producing objects for human needs, they are not working for themselves, similar to the workers and party members in George Orwell’s 1984. So, a ‘web of relationships’ formed though authentic action is boundless and unpredictable. As people bring about natality, they bring about new ways to change and transform society.

Before a ‘web of relationships’ is formed, it is crucial that individuals take authentic action. The most efficient way of doing so is through speech. As Arendt states 'In acting and speaking, men show who they are, reveal actively their unique personal identities and thus make their

appearance in the human world, while their physical identities appear without any activity of their own in the unique shape of body and sound of the voice. This disclosure of 'who' in contradistinction to 'what' somebody is ... is implicit in everything somebody says and does." Arendt makes a very clear distinction between the collective of 'whos' and groups of 'whats'. 'Speech', an authentic action is what separates the two when an individual 'discloses' themselves to other individuals. Having the ability to speak and take action is to have human freedom and not be a part of a 'human herd' and be inauthentic, and to continually speak and act makes us 'coauthors' of society and our lives. By speaking and taking action and being a part of the 'web of relationships, it allows an individual to be within the 'space of appearing' and reveal our authentic selves. The 'space of appearing' if to exist would need to transcend mortal life as according to Arendt "…If the world is to contain a public space, it cannot be erected for one generation and planned for the living only; it must transcend the life-span of mortal men." It is important to leave behind a sort of historical account of forms of human freedom achieved through authentic action as a public space. For instance, the Hong Kong Water Revolutions was largely situated in one suburb as it stands out as a symbol to protesters as a space of engaging in political speech and action together. In 2014, the student-led group Scholarism decided to 'take back' the Civic Square as a form of protest against the National Education school curriculum as it was a symbol of democracy and human freedom. Only when we, as individuals are engaging in political speech and action can we show the world we are authentic and unique and be a part of a 'web of relationships.

Not only is it important that individuals take authentic action and speak in 'spaces of appearings', Arendt also stresses on the importance of human plurality in human action. It is only when we are able to form 'web of relationships' that we can then transform and bring natality into our world as a collective. Acting in human plurality gives us democratic power and also means standing together in solidarity; authentic action is not an individuals' private pursuit or interest, it is individuals standing together equally and pursuing a common goal. It is so important as "Men in plural … can experience meaningfulness only because they can talk with and make sense to each other and themselves." Although 'men in plural' is limited to individuals who share the same beliefs and are in a 'web of relationships' together. Ultimately, it is only when individuals stand in solidarity do they have power, and the power will be present when there is human plurality. When human plurality disappears, so will power. But if individuals are able to stand together, there is unbound potential and are thus able to achieve extraordinary feats.

As a 'web of relationships' work in a collective and bring democratic power, it is also inherently linked with politics. The basis of politics is the people, the collective who takes authentic action and speaks together. It requires the ability to forgive and the capacity to make promises as these are crucial if natality is to be achieved. While democratic power has unbound potential, and to live authentically as according to Arendt is to have the human freedom to take authentic action and speak, it is true to an extent that in the modern world, genuine politics has disappeared. But first, what is 'modern world' as according to Arendt? It is domination from above and mass public censorship. It is the emergence of totalitarianism along with terror. It is also the time where conforming seems like a better option than taking action and fighting for human freedom. In short, it is where the authentic hierarchy of human activities have been inverted. On one hand it is worthy to take note of Arendt's context of her living through Nazi Germany and witnessing Fascist Italy, on the other, her take on the modern world is continually relevant to this day, with the rise of Communist China and the Xinjiang 're-education camps', Trump's totalitarianism, etc.

There are groups of individuals who continually take authentic action and speak, they have however become the minority. Many individuals nowadays are not willing to fully participate and take action to bring about change and newness. They have prioritised labour and work over action. Consumerism and capitalism have made individuals become consumed in their self-interest and are absorbed in what they can buy and have, instead of what they want. Furthermore, because of capitalism and the continual rise of the cost of living, work has essentially become the main service of life as there is now a big emphasis on money since it is a direct correlation to one's ability to fulfil basic human needs. So while it is a civic responsibility to fight for human freedom and take authentic action as according to Arendt, individuals have forgotten the importance of action and instead prioritised work and labour.

Although this is the grim reality of the modern world and Arendt's critical account may be true, recently we do see a revert of the hierarchy of human action. Looking at different protests and revolutions all over the world, individuals have begun to revert the hierarchy and place action as the most important. For instance, the current Catalan protests for independence see action and speech happening as Catalan protesters fight for change and bring newness to their country. Furthermore, the Hong Kong Water Revolutions also see a revert of the hierarchy as the protesters continue to create new forms of protesting like 'punishing' businesses who support the revolution, paying tax by the dollar, etc so as to include all kinds of people and collectives in hopes of more people placing action first. Ultimately, the hierarchy may be inverted, but it will always only be temporary. There will always be regimes who do not value speech and action and authentic human freedom, and it will always force individuals to step up. But most importantly, taking authentic action and fighting for our human freedom is a basic need, not unlike labour. It is also the only way to fully take responsibility of our own lives and live authentically. As Constanze Stelzenmüller states "The protests in Russian cities and in Hong Kong speak powerfully to the universality of the human desire for self-determination." We as humans need freedom and need to take authentic action.

Overall, Hannah Arendt's existential form of political philosophy is based on human freedom. It is the ability to live authentically in a democratic society and bring about natality when change is needed. It is the formation of 'web of relationships' based on political freedom and individuals working together towards a common goal through the use of speech and action in 'space of appearings'. And while Arendt's critical account of modern society may be accurate to an extent, it will never be permanent as capitalism, consumerism, populism, etc will never be able to mask over an individual's need for authentic human action and to fight for freedom when necessary.