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The Value of the Surface

Reappreciating Embodiment, Labor, and Necessity in Arendt's Political Thought

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ABSTRACT Through an unorthodox reading of Hannah Arendt, this article argues that her political thought contains unacknowledged resources for conceptualizing embodiment in politics, and in relation to the economy, physical needs, and appearance. In contrast to the way she is typically read, this essay develops an affirmative account of embodiment in Arendt's work. Arendt not only recognizes the role of the appearing body in action but also underscores the importance of labor and necessity for a human sense of reality. Throughout her oeuvre, she presents a historical analysis of the rise of a functionalist, processual understanding of life under capitalist modernity. She also develops an alternative, nonfunctionalist framing of living bodies, highlighting a gratitude for "given" aspects of existence and the value of the bodily surface as a sentient interface between embodied needs and the common world. The article tracks the development of these reflections in Arendt's engagements with Karl Marx, Simone Weil, and Adolf Portmann.

KEYWORDS Hannah Arendt, embodiment, necessity, appearance, labor, body

From the Occupy movement, Indignados, and the "Arab Spring" to current Black Lives Matter, Extinction Rebellion, and Women's Marches, progressive political action of the past decade has depended on a strong embodied presence.¹ At the same time, these corporeal democratic practices have prompted questions that relate to our bodies in another way. They protest the physical, structural, and symbolic threats imposed on bodies by discriminatory practices, biopolitical capitalism, and the looming socioecological catastrophe.

Arguably, the body is a central knot in the analysis of politics, as vast scholarly literature has suggested since the 1980s. Currently, due to the pressing concerns of the Anthropocene, inequality, precarity, and the transformation of work by automation, we, perhaps more than ever, need sophisticated approaches to understand-

ing bodies, their biological functions, processes, and their political and economic entanglements. In the hope of contributing to contemporary critical theory's ability to speak about the world and the body with new metaphors—which is essential for establishing better modes of caring for the world and the earth²—this essay turns to an unexpected resource: the political thought of Hannah Arendt.

The article presents an unorthodox interpretation of Arendt as a thinker who offers important reflections on the *interplay* between our bodily needs and the political cultivation of our surroundings. My reading of Arendt could be called “biocultural”; the concept, as defined by Samantha Frost, highlights the quality of the human body both as a biological organism with physical needs *and* as a “cultural artifact” produced by norms and power. Biocultural approaches do not treat biology as a foundational vocabulary, exalted by the authority of detached objectivity, but as an entangled aspect of “natureculture.” Biopolitics, the management of human populations through their biological processes, is one aspect of such entanglement, but definitely not the only one.³

“Biocultural” is not an idea we typically associate with Arendt. Usually in her thought, *culture* appears as a common ground between the activities of *work* and *action*, insulated from nature. However, as I suggest, nature and culture are not mutually exclusive in Arendt's work. She did not radically part ways with her previous thinking when in 1971 she wrote that culture is always “cultivated nature—nature being tended and being taken care of by one of nature's products called man.”⁴ The world as a public space for action relies not only on the products of work, but also on the cultivation of the biological aspects of our existence, including embodied needs, necessities, and our inter-/intra-action with nature.

The relationship between politics and embodiment is typically considered a blind spot in Arendt's political thought. The widespread acknowledgment of her contemporary relevance notwithstanding, political theorists usually fault her for a fateful “hesitation about the role of the body” or an “insistence that bodily, material factors have no place in action.”⁵ Judith Butler asserts that Arendt fails to account for the role of bodily gestures and nonverbalized deeds in political action, and separates politics from bodily needs, disavowing “those living and interdependent relations upon which our lives depend.”⁶ Due to such influential characterizations—some more persuasive than others—there is a significant lacuna in scholarly understanding regarding the role of embodiment in Arendt's work. Yet, despite her well-known skepticism toward the ideals of the *animal laborans* (the human being reduced to the function of the laborer) in politics, I argue, Arendt was attentive to the affirmative aspects of bodily existence. From her early writings to the unfinished *The Life of the Mind*, we find a continuous string of reflections on the *importance* of labor and necessity, on the role of embodied appearance in action, and on possibilities for addressing embodied needs in a politically viable manner.

My reading expands on a set of recent reinterpretations of Arendt's thought focused on various aspects of materiality (life, economics, work, nature), or on deconstructing the separations Arendt allegedly makes between the activities of labor, work, and action.⁷ I focus on the body as a junction of the concerns relating to physical needs, appearance, and freedom. The first section discusses the historical transformation of labor from the classical through the industrial period, highlighting Arendt's active dialogue with Marx and the tradition of political economy. Central to this transformation is the substitution of ancient, circular biocultural dynamics of labor with a more linear *functionalist process* in capitalist modernity. The later sections, in turn, seek to move beyond the prevalent notion of Arendt's "hesitation" about embodiment, unearthing—with and beyond Arendt—the promise of the *positive*, affirmative framings of the body. I trace the "joys of labor,"⁸ the affirmative role of necessity as a paradoxical precondition for freedom, and the gratitude for physical givenness in the framework of *The Human Condition*. I then argue that Arendt's reflections on embodiment crystallize in her somewhat neglected but innovative engagement with Adolf Portmann's zoology in *The Life of the Mind*.⁹

Alongside and beyond the well-known concern for natality, Arendt develops a vocabulary of embodied political appearance focused on givenness and bodily surface. I suggest that Arendt's appropriation of Portmann's morphology is crucial in helping us to see the *bodily surface* as a sentient interface between corporeal needs and the shared world. This does not amount to claiming that everything important exists on the surface. Many human needs and bodily processes obviously do not. The surface is an in-between that allows for meaningful interaction between these needs and the world of appearances we share with other people. Since the surface highlights the social norms that sometimes problematically guide our spectatorship, this perspective could also serve as an impetus for bringing Arendt's thought into more felicitous dialogue with critical theorizations of race. Ultimately, I reflect on the implications of this vocabulary in the context of the Anthropocene.

The Concept of Life: Ancient and Modern

In relation to embodiment, *The Human Condition* can be read as a history of economic formations. Instead of laying out a static ontology, Arendt traces historically the different frames, practices, and attitudes that have defined the role of labor and its relationship with politics.¹⁰ Often it is not immediately clear when Arendt is talking about labor as an activity in her own voice, when she is describing it through the lenses of the ancients, and when *sub specie capitalis*. Seeking to clarify these questions, I suggest that Arendt's debt to Marx has remained underestimated. Her engagement especially with *Capital* and the first volume of *Theories of Surplus Value* sets the stage for Arendt's understanding of labor's historical trajectory. Capitalism

turned labor into a function of growth, which Arendt considered harmful both for the activity itself and for the possibilities for political freedom.

For both Arendt and Marx, labor relates to the activities for meeting our most fundamental bodily needs. As Marx puts it in *Capital*, in a passage repeatedly cited and heavily highlighted by Arendt, labor is “human metabolism with nature.” In laboring, one sets in motion “the natural forces of his body in order to appropriate Nature’s productions in a form adapted to his own wants.”¹¹

Arendt traces labor across its specific historical moments, beginning with classical Greece, and its nascent political philosophy. There—and it is crucial to remember that Arendt is not advocating her own stance but describing what she took (sometimes mistakenly) as the views of the Greeks—the vital necessities of the body and laboring activity were household issues. Tied to the cyclicity of seasons and human needs, the ancient understanding of life, necessity, and labor was exclusively circular. Both “nature’s household” and human households focused on the recurring “necessities of sheer life” always moved “in the same circle” (*HC*, 98). To achieve the “good life” of the *polis*, free men needed to liberate themselves from compulsive labor which, according to Arendt, required ruling others (i.e., slaves and women) in the *oikos*. Conversely, whoever took care of biological necessities for others, could not be free (*HC*, 31–32, 37). Today, as Arendt well knew, this solution is neither available nor acceptable. Besides, labor and life as phenomena have changed so decisively that any direct application of *oikos* or *zoë* terminology under modern conditions is ill advised.

In modernity, Arendt (in)famously argues, the activities necessary for sustaining life have become a “collective issue” rather than a household one (see, e.g., *HC*, 33, 46). This is not to say that the modern state is nothing but a Greek *oikos* writ large. Instead, modern economic temporalities radically transcend the ancient circularity. Life and labor do not simply change locations, but become developed into a completely new concept, imagery, and biocultural practice. Laboring activity, she argues, is always connected to biological life, but it “remained *stationary* for thousands of years, imprisoned in . . . circular, monotonous recurrence.” It is only under the determinations of capitalist modernity that labor becomes “transformed into a swiftly progressing development” (*HC*, 46–47, 105–6). The expropriation of property and “naked exposure to the exigencies of life” of certain strata of society, as Arendt learned from Marx, created the conditions—later exacerbated by industrial production—for the liberation of labor from its natural limitations, releasing a process of endless growth.¹²

In her copies of *Capital* and *Theories of Surplus Value*, Arendt consistently underlines passages dealing with the self-valorization processes of capital and the ability of “labour-power to create more than its own value, to produce more than the needs dictated by its life process.”¹³ The result is a historically unforeseen

process of growth and a constant multiplication of needs that are “felt to belong to the necessities of life” as much as the most immediate bodily needs.¹⁴ Arendt’s thinking on this score can be elucidated by a passage from the *Denktagebuch*. The emergence of the modern monetary economy and the transformation of labor into “earning,” Arendt muses, hides the true necessities of life from view. Rather than removing the association of necessity from labor, however, this leads to a projection of the *felt and perceived* necessity onto the processes of earning and spending which, unlike natural necessities, have no limits.¹⁵

In capitalist production, labor is still noticeably repetitive, especially from the viewpoint of the individual laborer. One has to go to work, buy groceries, cook, and do the dishes on a more or less daily basis. Whether performed in the assembly line, the office, or in the household (traditionally by a gendered/racialized workforce¹⁶), labor consists of recurring tasks. This repetitiveness, as well as “toil and trouble,” are among the historical continuities in the activity of laboring (see, e.g., *HC*, 107). Modern labor as a collective activity, however, has become the motor of a movement that is far from circular. The individual circles, so to speak, have been broken open and fused together to create a wavelike process of limitless growth and expansion. Here again, Arendt seems to be navigating in Marx’s wake. For both, their disagreements notwithstanding, the modern economy was essentially defined by the necessity of ceaseless expansion without limits and boundaries.¹⁷ Labor became the most central human activity in modernity because it was turned into a function of growth. This metamorphosis comes at a price.

The mechanization of production in capitalist modernity has led to a point where what is demanded of laborers from the twentieth century onward is “sheer automatic functioning, as though individual life had actually been submerged in the over-all life process of the species.” For such activity, “laboring is too lofty, too ambitious a word” (*HC*, 322). Capitalism transformed the experience of labor into a function—something that is only meaningful through its contribution to an overall process, not as an autonomous activity. Similarly Marx, in another passage of *Theories of Surplus Value* highlighted by Arendt, describes the “striking fact” that “the capitalist as such is only a function of capital, the labourer a function of labour-power.”¹⁸

Arendt considered Simone Weil to be among the most clear-sighted articulators of modern industrial labor. In her “Factory Journal” Weil emphasizes the worker’s inability to make sense of the functional role played by their individual tasks in the production process as a whole.¹⁹ As our labor-power is harnessed to feed the ever-expanding process of capital, our ability to enjoy the vitality experienced in laboring is diminished. Indeed, reflecting on her experiences, Weil repeatedly comes back to the sense of being a slave.²⁰

The power of this new functionalist imagery was amplified by its resonance with the modern *biological* concept of life, and the framework of science more generally. After the death of Darwin, evolution became understood exclusively in terms of adaptationism/functionalism—the explanation of physical features as species-level adaptation to environment via natural selection (potentially leading to linear development). Again, it is not that the circular aspects of life vanished altogether, but they became subsumed by functions in a broader life process of the species or, in the case of human communities, the life process of the society.

Like Michel Foucault, Arendt is attentive to the fact that scientific developments in fields such as biology, statistics, economics, and social sciences are directly linked to modern administration, which treats human beings as a mass “affected by overall processes” (HC, 256).²¹ If politics is reduced to a function of the “life process of society,” of economic growth, it tends to become a domain of ruling—an activity diametrically opposed to freedom and equality.²² But this does not mean Arendt considers biological and economic concerns politically irrelevant. In “Karl Marx and the Tradition of Political Thought” (1953), she notes that economy, as “the organized attempt of men living together at handling and securing the necessities and luxuries of life” has indeed “always belonged to the public concern.”²³ It is not a matter of excluding bodies and necessity from politics, then, as many readers of Arendt have concluded.²⁴ It is a question of approaching these questions from the viewpoint of the principles “for the sake of which” we engage in politics.

As Butler suggests, embodied assemblies—like Occupy—exhibit the potential to address the contemporary “biopolitical situation” as a properly political, collective question.²⁵ For Arendt, this means that these questions are attended critically from the viewpoint of the common world, and not solely from the viewpoint of the life process and its functions. As we shall see, her exposure to the work of Adolf Portmann in the 1970s made Arendt realize that in order to think bodies otherwise, outside the functionalist framework of process-thinking, it was necessary to rethink the very notion of biological existence. But this does not mean that *The Human Condition* was blind to these aspects of bodily being.

A Free Gift from Nowhere: Embodiment in the “Early” Arendt

Carefully read, *The Human Condition* reveals Arendt’s concern with the body as pivotal for politics. As we will see, the *laboring body* anchors us to necessity, which is a paradoxical condition of freedom. It is vital that labor is organized in such a way that this anchorage to necessity is not experienced primarily as compulsion. Further, as I will suggest below, the body for Arendt is central for political action as a medium that, by *appearing*, opens up the possibility that even when struggling for bodily needs, the selfsame struggling bodies disclose *more* than their functional needs.

Here, I seek to augment the readings by Peg Birmingham, Adriana Cavarero, and Linda Zerilli, who, against much of the secondary literature, highlight (in Cavarero's words) the political role of "corporeal materiality . . . in all of its perceptible concreteness," and the *inclusion* of biological givenness in the public sphere.²⁶ By calling aspects of embodiment "given," we should not understand Arendt as referring to things that are *static*. My body obviously changes over time, and can be actively transformed in, say, gender reassignment. Yet, it remains something that has been "given" to me and cannot be changed completely. To some extent, even *socially* assigned identities carry a related sense of involuntariness.

The question of physical givenness was of importance to Arendt early on. In her book on Rahel Varnhagen, written mostly in the 1930s, she located the limits of mendacity in the fact that "neither lies nor nausea nor disgust can lift one out of one's own skin."²⁷ In *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Arendt concluded her discussion of the stateless with reflections on their reduction to qualities that are "merely mysteriously given," such as the "shape of our bodies." There, she seems to fall back on the authority of the Greeks in relegating the "dark background of mere givenness" into the private sphere, justifying the suspicion and "deep resentment" of public life against "the disturbing miracle" of our unchangeable and unique features.²⁸ Curiously, however, in the "Concluding Remarks" of the first edition of *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Arendt returns to the question, now dubbing the distrust of "everything merely given" as a characteristically *modern* phenomenon leading to resentment and nihilism. As an alternative, she suggests an orientation of "a fundamental gratitude for the few elementary things that indeed are invariably given to us, such as life itself." As a political attitude, gratitude equals an affirmation of the "tremendous bliss" of plurality, and a reconciliation of ourselves to the diversity of human beings.²⁹ Later, she would limit the political potential of gratitude to "exceptional circumstances,"³⁰ but this is not the full story. Starting from *The Human Condition*, her position becomes more articulate and nuanced, distinguishing between different modes of gratitude to various aspects of givenness.

In the prologue of *The Human Condition*, Arendt raises a worry about a "rebellion against human existence as it has been given, a free gift from nowhere" (*HC*, 2–3). Early on, she also attacks philosophers' contempt for the body, arguing that before the emergence of such views it was generally held that "to be subject to [physical] necessity was only one aspect of bodily existence, and the body, once freed of this necessity, was capable of that pure appearance the Greeks called beauty" (*HC*, 16n15). Rebellion against givenness manifests itself most straightforwardly as a will to eliminate plurality. However, Arendt implies that it can also take the form of an undesirable resentment against bodily necessity as such. Bodily needs must be met so that we are freed from their compulsive elements. But the

complete elimination—through automation no less than through slavery—of necessity threatens life itself, so central is it to our existence (*HC*, 71).

Rebellion against necessity was something that both Arendt and Weil—perhaps wrongly—located in Marx’s description of postrevolutionary society. Traces of such an attitude can also be detected in contemporary discussions on automation: for example, in the increasingly popular “fully automated luxury communism” (FALC).³¹ While Arendt herself sometimes treated automation almost as a *deus ex machina*, saving us from the complexities of physical needs, she also offers important reminders about the value and merits of labor and necessity: “pain and effort are not just symptoms which can be removed without changing life itself; they are rather the modes in which life itself, together with the necessity to which it is bound, makes itself felt.” From this perspective, both poverty *and* superabundance are threats. An effortless life of excessive wealth comes dangerously close to losing both its sense of realness and the capacity of acknowledging one’s embeddedness in necessity, which, in the final analysis, is the condition of freedom.³² And when it comes to labor, it too contains a “blessing” or joy in the form of balancing effort and gratification. Poverty and great riches deprive us of this “elemental happiness”—hence Arendt’s insistence on several occasions on the *political* importance of liberating the whole population from poverty (albeit her occasionally overstating the force of poverty as preventing the poor themselves from taking up this task).³³

The fight against social injustice is paramount to achieving Brecht’s ideal—shared by Arendt—of a “world in which all people are equally visible.”³⁴ But this should not be confused with a revolt against necessity as such.³⁵ Being tied to the *compulsions* of the “realm of necessity” (e.g., poverty, pain) is not the same as necessity *per se*. The attempt to liberate oneself absolutely from labor and necessity is an attempt to eliminate one of the basic conditions of human life. Necessity, including noncompulsory labor, is, as Weil was fond of reminding us, paramount to the sensation of reality. Hence (for Weil): “Aim: that the conditions of existence should be such that as much as possible is perceived”—that is, the intermediary steps between needs and their satisfaction should be as traceable as possible.³⁶

To reiterate, the point my reading of Arendt is getting at is this: necessity and laboring—considered independently from the structures of domination—are not a straightforward curse. Necessity is not merely an inconvenience that needs to be taken care of so that human beings become free for whatever is conceived to be at the top of the hierarchy of activities, whether that something is action or leisure. What we—perhaps by extending Arendt’s logic—should aim at is ways of thinking in less hierarchical terms altogether (*HC*, 306, 16–17). The key, then, is to pay attention to the pluripotentiality of the body that is disclosed when necessities are acknowledged and taken care of, but not forgotten.

Let us now turn our attention to the body as appearance. One of the foundations of Arendt's thought is the claim that there are things that excel in the public light, and others that need to be hidden from it. Thus, Arendt sometimes strays into sweeping generalizations such as "it has always been the bodily part of human existence that needed to be hidden in privacy." But as we have seen, "what goes on within the confines of the body" is in fact only *one* aspect of bodily existence even according to her own terms (*HC*, 72, 63, 16n15).³⁷ The body—quite analogously to the publicly relevant "exterior appearance" of the classical household—can also be seen as something that forms a *link* between the public space of appearances and the realm of physical necessities.³⁸ Furthermore, while the value of bodily appearance relies on diverse spectators, it is not necessarily tied to a preconstituted public space or categorically excluded from, say, workplaces and homes.

For Arendt, bodily needs (or, say, ailments) do not automatically appear as objects of public judgment. This does not mean they are bracketed, that we have to leave them in the cloakroom when entering the public sphere. But they need to be "transformed . . . into a shape to fit them for public appearance" (*HC*, 50). In other words, issues such as hunger and food distribution have to be addressed in relationship to the plurality of viewpoints that constitutes the public and have to be related to political principles such as justice. It is for this reason that speech is a pivotal aspect of public action. But this is not to say that the body plays no role whatsoever. Speech is always tied "to the existence of a living body" and action to "material objects" (*HC*, 183). Given the right institutional arrangements, bodily acts, the body-as-an-appearance, can play an important mediating role in "surfacing" physical needs to the public sphere, as topics of pluralistic democratic debate.

Appearing also reveals another element of embodiment, distinct from the experience of the body in labor. In contradiction to the metaphysical primacy of Being over Appearing, Arendt holds that appearing brings to light a type of objective reality that is not available, for example, in the interiority of one's own psyche. "The human sense of reality," she argues, "demands that men actualize the sheer passive givenness of their being, not in order to change it but in order to make articulate and call into full existence what otherwise they would have to suffer passively anyhow" (*HC*, 208). Nature (*physis*, that which *appears by itself*), before it became an invisible, functional process, was intimately linked to the human space of appearances and history (*HC*, 150).³⁹ From this perspective, life in its corporeality is indeed like a free gift from nowhere, calling for a *confirmation* of "the naked fact of our original physical appearance" (*HC*, 176–77).

Everything that appears—the body included—has a distinct shape of its own (*HC*, 173). This distinctiveness transcends any attempt to reduce it to mere function. Even rulership, which tends to eliminate plurality, to turn the many into one, finds its limits in bodily appearance, which persistently serves as a reminder of

human differences (HC, 224).⁴⁰ The ability of appearance as such to disrupt relations of rule is also seen in an incident Arendt relates from imperial Rome, where the idea of having slaves dress uniformly in public was turned down, *not* because this would reveal their true numbers, but simply because the Romans, with “sound political instinct,” realized the dangerousness of “mere appearance in public.” Later, the adoption of the *sans-culotte* affirmed the conspicuousness of the labor movement in the public realm, instantiating the importance of appearance in making manifest the power potential of a group (HC, 218, 218n53). The experience of embodied appearance in public both carries the potential of attuning its subjects to the promises of public spiritedness and constitutes a critical vector in the conceptualization of power.

Yet, an objection might be raised: does Arendt not insist that only the *verbalization* of acts makes them meaningful, as opposed to physicality and “mere bodily existence”? Isn’t it only when I speak that I become a *unique* “who” instead of being merely *distinct*, or a “what” (HC, 176, 179)? This might be true in most cases, but not universally. I think Butler goes too far when she claims that for Arendt “the body does not enter the speech act” and that nonverbal modes of action, such as public mourning, are lost on her as potential signifiers of freedom and equality.⁴¹ In fact, Arendt cites the “silent procession of black-clad women in the streets of Russian-occupied Budapest, mourning their dead in public” as the “last political gesture of the [Hungarian] revolution.”⁴² While lamenting the loss of their public freedom and the lives of their loved ones, these women become the living embodiments of the courage and freedom manifested in the revolution.

Relatedly, Arendt’s distinction between the unique “who” (disclosed in action) and the pre-given “what” (e.g., social identity) should not be overly dichotomized.⁴³ The “who” is inseparable from the embodied sociopolitical context and thus always intertwined with the “what.” Arendt famously noted that under Nazism, it would have been a “dangerous evasion of reality” to answer the “who” question with anything else but “a Jew.”⁴⁴ Applied to such cases, the dichotomy between “what” and “who” crumbles. This, I submit, is not an accident but suggests that this distinction (like that between public and private) is not intended as watertight. The political “who” is always actively and necessarily constituted in relation to the “what”—for example, one’s visible social (racial, gender, ethnic) identity. The biological body is always already waiting to be politically inscribed, the “artificial” public persona already entangled with the embodied “givens,” both natural and socially assigned. That Arendt speaks of “unique distinctness” suggests that the two aspects—embodied givenness and enacted uniqueness—are intertwined (HC, 176). At least in “exceptional” situations, *the “who” might be nothing but an active affirmation of the “what.”*

Arguably, the aesthetic politics of embodiment in *The Human Condition* are underdeveloped and partially incoherent. The reflections I have highlighted here,

however, point to the body as an interface between our physical needs and the world we share with others, and as an object of aesthetic-political judgment, open to a democratic audience nonexclusively. This view emerges in its full bloom in *The Life of the Mind*.

Function versus Appearance; or, “The Value of the Surface”

“We live amid surfaces.”

—Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Experience”

“For me, seeming is what is truly effective and alive.”

—Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*

“Is there no trace of the biological in the sphere of appearance?” asks Butler in her rejoinder to Arendt.⁴⁵ In this section, I will argue that there indeed is more than a *trace*, that the space of appearance is in fact extensively intertwined with “the biological.” It was her engagement with the Swiss biologist Adolf Portmann that provided Arendt with a richer and more precise vocabulary to articulate the views on biologically rooted appearance that linger in her early work.

The discussion on biology and embodiment in *The Life of the Mind* emerges directly from the relationship between appearance and the problems of process-oriented thinking examined above. The modern notion of process is directly linked, Arendt argues, to the dominant functionalism of biology, sociology, and psychology. Appearances are now interpreted as “functions of the life process,” as conditions for the true, fundamental processes that take place within the living organism or through the interactions of a population with its environment.⁴⁶ Similarly, modern economic formations—as we saw in the first section—depend less on individuals tied to a concrete place in the world through property than on uprooted and superfluous people who have no anchor except for the workplace and “pure functioning in the work process.”⁴⁷

Portmann posits an alternative to modern functionalism. His research into shapes and forms in animal life has shown, in Arendt’s retelling, that the functionalist hypothesis focused on self- and species-preservation is insufficient. Portmann’s argument is that the functionalist method sees things like horns only as weapons or ornaments serving an adaptive function, and thereby fails to fully grasp their shape.⁴⁸ Functionalism “makes us strangers to the appearance of the living creatures around us, to what is evident to our senses.”⁴⁹ Relatedly, some contemporary biologists have highlighted the autonomous role of beauty and diversity in evolution. They, more so than Portmann, also pay heed to ways of convincingly integrating nonadaptationist tendencies into evolutionary theory, hearkening back to the aesthetic sensitivity that was present in Charles Darwin, a great observer of appearances, but that has become suppressed in subsequent biology. The penultimate

words of *The Origin of Species* praise the “endless forms most beautiful and most wonderful,” and the later *The Descent of Man and Selection in Relation to Sex* emphasizes aesthetic judgment as a supplement to adaptation in evolution.⁵⁰ Yet, due to the influence of Darwin’s colleague Alfred Wallace, the idea of evolution as a singular process reducible to adaptation and natural selection became dominant early on. It is this reduction that Portmann contests.

Against functionalism, Portmann holds that the external surface of an organism has a certain autonomy over life-sustaining functions. Not all visual manifestations of a species can be given a functional explanation. Based on this idea, Arendt asks, “Could it not be that appearances are not there for the sake of the life process but, on the contrary, that the life process is there for the sake of appearances? Since we live in an appearing world, is it not much more plausible that the relevant and the meaningful in this world of ours should be located precisely on the surface?” (*LMT*, 27). This question emerges directly from Arendt’s reading of Portmann. In *Animal Forms*, he cites a view “by no means rare,” according to which the exterior of animal life only exists to preserve and serve the internal mechanisms. In her copy of the book, Arendt writes in the margin: “*Warum nicht umgekehrt?*” — “Why not the other way around?”⁵¹ The evidence of experience, Arendt argues, in any case, contravenes the pervasiveness of this theoretical construct. No matter how thoroughly we describe the world as a functional apparatus, a set of processes, the fact remains that “nobody so far has succeeded in *living*” in such a world (*LMT*, 26). Despite the temptation to look for true being behind appearances, it is the surface that is key to our experience of worldliness and culture. “It rather looks as though . . . the inner, non-appearing organs exist only in order to bring forth and maintain the appearances. ‘Prior to all functions for the purpose of preservation of the individual and the species . . . we find the simple fact of appearing as self-display that makes these functions meaningful.’”⁵² Portmann and Arendt argue that the internal organs lack meaningful appearance—if forced to appear, they do so “inauthentically.” What I would add is that functionalism irons out differences even in the realm of inauthentic appearances. A function is an abstraction, and as such *nonappearing by definition*. It is embodied neither in a specific organ or individual organisms, nor in the world constituted by such organisms. Luckily, functions are not all there is to bodily existence.

Following Portmann, Arendt highlights “the value of the surface,” referring to the enormous power of exhibition or display of the organism’s form, its appearing surface.⁵³ As Portmann suggests, the fact that living beings are perceivable (through all five senses) by a plurality of spectators—as all matter is—evokes an answer, an additional “urge to self-display” that, importantly, transcends mere interest in life-preservation.⁵⁴ Up to a point, public appearance is a “natural” thing to do. It is this appearing quality of life’s surface that Arendt celebrates.

Despite the enormous differences in *how* the world appears to them, and how they appear in it, the world is a world of appearing surfaces to all species (*LMT*, 21, 29–30). Nonhuman animals too “make their appearance like actors on a stage set for them,” a stage constituted by fellow “actors,” spectators, and a material location. But only humans have a world in the full sense of the word, one that is constantly remade by action and preserved by taking care of common objects (*LMT*, 21–36).⁵⁵ Human beings, for Arendt, are uniquely capable of genuine *self-presentation* in which, say, sorrow is transformed into a form that is judged to be fit to enter public space via appearances.

The human world is an institutional space that allows a meaningful display of bodily surfaces. It also sets norms and expectations for public appearance. Affirming the surface does not mean ignoring the fact that bodily markers—being non-white, female, queer, trans*, or simply not looking well-off enough—can expose one to violence or discrimination. In far too many cases, the “what” elements of one’s appearance (like gender or race), *overdetermine* the “who.” Due to what Linda Alcoff has called learned modes of perception, the “what” becomes a powerful predictor of social privilege or lack thereof.⁵⁶ “I am the slave . . . of my own appearance,” Frantz Fanon once pointed out.⁵⁷ If a person’s visual markers dominate the way they are seen, Arendt laments in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, whatever they do will be explained as being driven by qualities *not* tangibly present in their actual deeds. Under such conditions, both equality and freedom are lost.⁵⁸ In line with her critique of functionalism, though, it is not so much the visible surfaces that are to blame for this overdetermination, but the quasi-biological or “cultural” connotations.

It is worth pausing to unpack the significance of Portmann’s morphology for Arendt. Whereas the modern notion of nature tends toward explaining away appearances in the service of invisible processes, the idea of “surface” pulls in another direction: toward the world we share with others. It teases forth a different attunement, allowing us to appreciate bodies as carriers of political meanings in their distinct appearance. It encourages sensing bodies “bioculturally” from the viewpoint of the public world, without reducing them to servants of all-embracing processes. Political meaning can very well be linked to the needs of these bodies, but it is worldly context that guides spectators in their judgments about the bodily appearances. The bodily surface acts as a sentient interface between the body’s interior and the world. Sometimes this can take place without words, as in the case of the mourning Hungarian women, or more recently in the various “die-ins” organized to protest racialized police violence or extinction. Most of the time, however, words accompany embodied action, giving it further significance. But in verbalized acts, too, the bodily surface is full of visual and auditory cues that help us make

sense of the acts of others, something that internet conversations, for instance, cannot reproduce.

Public appearance can be conceived as a supplement to the body's sheer givenness, distinctness, unconscious manners, and so forth, all contributing to its ability to act as an easel for political meaning. Anne O'Byrne has helpfully described this dynamic as "syncopated temporality" in which public actualization belatedly makes my physical birth *my* coming into the world.⁵⁹ That we are capable of action and new beginnings means that "*up to a point* we can choose how to appear to others" (*LMT*, 34). Like the physical environment of action in general, the body's givenness is a condition that both limits and enables political articulation and self-presentation, underscoring the entanglement of voluntary and involuntary aspects of appearance. We can respond to and modify what we have been "given" by symbolic choices (from clothing to language). Yet, involuntary gestures and bodily responses condition, in complex ways, our ability to act politically and to form relationships to others. In the end, what we disclose when we appear to a plurality of spectators can never be known beforehand even by ourselves, because appearance prompts an otherwise inaccessible dimension of reality.

An important, but by no means the only, aspect of self-presentation relates to the ability of human bodies to embody political principles.⁶⁰ Bodies are capable of such manifestation in several ways, including through audible words and exemplary deeds. As the example of the Hungarian mourners implies, Arendt would have no trouble accepting Butler's suggestion that in some cases bodily acts that "are not quickly assimilated to verbal speech" can nevertheless "signify principles of freedom and equality."⁶¹ When we think of political notions, such as "courage," we do not operate with abstractions but with concrete, corporeal examples.

The capacity for self-display finds its inverse counterpart in the ability to hide. Foucault has famously demonstrated the interdependence of permanent visibility and the operations of power. More recently it has been argued that undocumented migrants and homeless people face a "regime of exposure" that deprives them of the very chance of *deliberate* self-presentation.⁶² Lack of access to hygiene or a place to sleep, for instance, not only heightens vulnerability—it also impacts one's physical appearance, making it more difficult to choose, even "up to a point," how to appear to others.

Conversely, bodies appearing in an unexpected fashion, and finding spectators capable of judging them in a broader worldly context, is a powerful channel of political change. It bears repeating that Arendt's focus is on the *spectators*: the witnesses of the deeds (see, e.g., *LMT*, 19, 92–98, 132–33). Instead of giving guidance to actors, the emphasis should be placed on the implicit rules and frames that guide our spectatorship. As in the case of process-thinking and functionalism, what is

called for is a critical analysis of the logics of overdetermination, and a development of new ways of perceiving.

We need to orient ourselves toward perceiving bodies with a worldly, political perspective. It is a matter of preparing for a “fuller, richer concept of living forms.”⁶³ The problem is that when we *talk* about bodies—or political deeds addressing the needs of bodies—we easily reduce them, in toto, to their functions (their needs, labor-power, and so forth). Functionalism treats bodies as exchangeable and effaces individuality. This does not mean that we should *ignore* the functional point of view, just supplement it. We, as Portmann emphasizes, need “experts in the technique of the theatre.”⁶⁴ What we should resist is a *reductionist mode of seeing* in which the aesthetic-political surface is lost in a sea of biological-economic-sociological functions.

Conclusion

“That visibility which makes us most vulnerable is that which also is the source of our greatest strength.”

—Audre Lorde, “The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action”

This article has traced and outlined, in dialogue with Hannah Arendt, a political perspective in which embodiment can be appreciated independently of functional demands. What Arendt is doing, it seems to me, is sketching a vocabulary that allows us to appreciate in their distinctiveness the various aspects of human biocultural existence—our embeddedness in necessity included—without collapsing the differences between them. Labor—she reminds us—is not always a negative burden, and necessity is not always something to escape. What is needed is a transformation of our sensibilities toward a political-aesthetic way of seeing bodies as *worldly things*, independent of their functional role. Focusing on the appearance of the bodily surface as an interface allows us to appreciate the political struggle for necessities more fully, even when the objectives of these struggles are not met.

Elaborating this vocabulary of worldly embodiment helps us resist the authoritative voices explaining politics in terms of biological or economic functioning. Paying attention to the surface as a center of Arendt’s political theory can also help us rethink her thought in relation to her “blind spots.” Reconsidering the received wisdom about what Arendt says about the body could open venues of insightful dialogue with the thread of reflections on race and appearance extending from Ralph Ellison to Fanon, Lorde, Alcoff, and beyond. Such authors can serve as important correctives to Arendt’s well-known shortcomings in racial politics (including occasional outright racism) exactly due to their sensitivity toward the “surface phenomena” discussed here.

Arendt’s musings on life, economics, and politics seem particularly pertinent for thinking about the prospects of democratic politics in the Anthropocene—a world shaped by the biophysical limits of growth, mass extinctions, and economic-political polarization. Today, the world is at stake perhaps more radically than ever. The “undisturbed development of the life process of society”⁶⁵ has turned out to be a devastating force to a magnitude hardly suspected by Arendt, who did have her doubts regarding the desirability of economic growth. We are in midst of a “rift” in the human metabolic relationship with the natural environment.⁶⁶

One of the pressing challenges for political thought in the upcoming years will be to confront the destructiveness of a society based on extraction and growth, instead of remaining “dazzled by the abundance of its growing fertility and caught in the smooth functioning of a never-ending process” (HC, 135). Addressing these issues *democratically* means we need to focus on the conditions of sharing a world with others. While we need to look elsewhere as well, Arendt’s critique of functionalist thinking is a voice that ought not to be ignored. Cultivating a gratitude for the plurality of life’s appearances may turn out to be of critical importance, especially due to the catastrophic pressures—uninhabitable environments, growing waves of refugees, pandemics, and rising neo-authoritarianism—imposed by our new predicament on social-political institutions. And are we not in “exceptional circumstances” where the basic gratitude for all things given—life itself and earth as a life-sustaining environment among them—is bound to become a politically powerful force? Could it emerge as a guiding principle for a politics of life, for the sake of the world and the earth?

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Notes

1. To some extent, the same could be said of conservative movements, from the Tea Party to the criminal mobs storming the US Capitol or trying to storm the Reichstag in Berlin.
2. Fishel, *Microbial State*, 22, 39.

3. Frost, *Biocultural Creatures*, 1–5, 16–23, 152–53. “Natureculture” refers to the inseparability of natural/biophysical and cultural/social in the constitution of reality.
4. McCarthy and Arendt, *Between Friends*, 293.
5. Krause, *Freedom beyond Sovereignty*, 15, 204n79; Diprose and Ziarek, *Arendt, Natality, and Biopolitics*, 56.
6. Butler, *Notes toward a Performative Theory*, 19, 44–47, 88, 217.
7. Butler, *Notes toward a Performative Theory*; Vatter, *Republic of the Living*; Klein, “Fit to Enter the World”; Howard, “Hannah Arendt’s Contribution”; Braun, “Biopolitics and Temporality”; Markell, “Arendt’s Work”; Diprose and Ziarek, *Arendt, Natality, and Biopolitics*; Duarte, “Biopolitics and the Dissemination of Violence”; Biser, “Unnatural Growth of the Natural”; Ephraim, *Who Speaks for Nature?*; Honig, *Public Things*; Kubota et al., “Recognizing the Body”; Allen, foreword; Birmingham, “Worldly Immortality.”
8. Arendt, *Human Condition*, 140. Hereafter cited in the text as *HC*.
9. See O’Byrne, “Task of Knowledgeable Love”; Arnold, “Caught in Penelope’s Web.”
10. The static ontological interpretation is the “canonical” reading of *The Human Condition*. By questioning this interpretation, I do not deny the historical continuities that allow us to talk about, say, labor in both the twentieth century and Greek antiquity. My point is that the static reading fails to account for the vastly consequential *transformations* Arendt maps. See also Hyvönen, “Labor as Action.”
11. Marx, *Das Kapital*, 133, 139; Marx, *Capital*, 197–198, 201. For Arendt’s underlining and marginalia, see Hannah Arendt Collection. Arendt writes that the English translation she is using (Modern Library) falls short “of Marx’s precision”; see *HC*, 99n34.
12. *HC*, 255–56. See Marx, *Das Kapital*, 644–67.
13. Marx, *Theories of Surplus Value*, 49. See also Marx, *Das Kapital*, 111–12. For Arendt’s copies, see Hannah Arendt Collection.
14. Arendt, *Modern Challenge to Tradition*, 290. See also *HC*, 46–47, 105.
15. Arendt, *Denktagebuch*, 331.
16. The composition of the workforce is something Arendt herself rarely mentions.
17. Marx, *Das Kapital*, 110–22, 184–87.
18. Marx, *Theories of Surplus Value*, 193.
19. Weil, *Formative Writings*, 193.
20. Weil, *Formative Writings*, 160, 194.
21. Foucault, “Society Must Be Defended,” 242–46. On Arendt and Foucault, see Braun, “Biopolitics and Temporality”; Blencowe, *Biopolitical Experience*, 5, 105–17. On process-thinking, see Hyvönen, “Invisible Streams.”
22. Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 149, 155.
23. Arendt, *Modern Challenge to Tradition*, 253.
24. Lechte, “Rethinking Arendt’s Theory of Necessity”; Krause, *Freedom beyond Sovereignty*, 162; Butler, *Notes toward a Performative Theory*, 47.
25. Butler, *Notes toward a Performative Theory*, 15, see also 14–18, 196–98.
26. Cavarero, *Relating Narratives*, 20–21. See also Zerilli, “Arendtian Body”; Birmingham, *Hannah Arendt*, 33, 71, 87, 104; Birmingham, “Worldly Immortality.”
27. Arendt, *Rahel Varnhagen*, 93. On Arendt’s dissertation, see Birmingham, *Hannah Arendt*, 75–80.
28. Arendt, *Origins of Totalitarianism*, 300–302; see also Birmingham, *Hannah Arendt*, 71–76.
29. Arendt, *Origins of Totalitarianism*, 435–39.

30. Arendt, *Jewish Writings*, 466.
31. Bastani, *Fully Automated Luxury Communism*. For a related Arendtian argument, see Suuronen, “Resisting Biopolitics.”
32. *HC*, 120, see also 71, 84, 119–21; Arendt, *Thinking without a Banister*, 251–53, 345–53; Arendt, *On Revolution*, 23; Arendt, *Crises of the Republic*, 212–13.
33. *HC*, 108; Arendt, *Essays in Understanding*, 224. Recent commentaries offer various interpretations on these questions. See Gündoğdu, *Rightlessness in the Age of Rights*, 15–16, 57, 65–69; Klein, “Fit to Enter the World”; Lederman, *Hannah Arendt and Participatory Democracy*; Owens, *Economy of Force*; Suuronen, “Resisting Biopolitics”; Lechte, “Rethinking Arendt’s Theory of Necessity,” 5; Krause, *Freedom beyond Sovereignty*, 162; Butler, *Notes toward a Performative Theory*, 47.
34. Arendt, *Reflections on Literature and Culture*, 326n10.
35. Arendt, *Denktagebuch*, 175, 208.
36. Weil, *First and Last Notebooks*, 7–9, 19.
37. For insightful commentary on Arendt’s “excellence thesis,” see Loidolt, *The Phenomenology of Plurality*, 133–45.
38. *HC*, 63, 112; Markell, “Arendt’s Work,” 26.
39. Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 41, 47–48.
40. Arendt also writes about “singularity and distinction” in very embodied terms, reflecting on the surprisingness of “identical-looking twins.” Arendt, *Modern Challenge to Tradition*, 350.
41. Butler, *Notes toward a Performative Theory*, 45–48, 82–83.
42. Arendt, *Thinking without a Banister*, 105. On affective dimensions of this, see Guaraldo, “Public Happiness.”
43. Diprose and Ziarek offer a related formulation as a (partial) departure from Arendt (*Arendt, Natality, and Biopolitics*, 58–59). I conceive the matter more as a productive internal tension. See also Sari, “Arendtian Recognitive Politics.”
44. Arendt, *Men in Dark Times*, 23.
45. Butler, *Notes toward a Performative Theory*, 87.
46. Arendt, *Thinking*, 26–27. Henceforth cited in the text as *LMT*. See also Portmann, *Die Tiergestalt*; Portmann, *Animal Forms and Patterns*, 17.
47. Arendt, *Denktagebuch*, 341.
48. Portmann, *Animal Forms*, 86.
49. Portmann, *Animal Forms*, 17.
50. Darwin, *Origin of Species*, 564; Darwin, *Descent of Man and Selection in Relation to Sex*, 2:401. On contemporary biologists, see especially Prum, *Evolution of Beauty*. Other researchers that have contributed to the critique of reductive adaptationism include Stephen Jay Gould, Elisabeth Vrba, and Elisabeth Lloyd. On Portmann, see Kleisner, “Semantic Morphology of Adolf Portmann.”
51. Portmann, *Animal Forms*, 204.
52. *LMT*, 27. Internal quotation from Portmann, *Das Tier als soziales Wesen*, 252.
53. Portmann, *Animal Forms*, 13, 166.
54. See also Arendt, *Denktagebuch*, 660; cf. *HC*, 176.
55. Whether Arendt commits herself to inexcusable anthropocentrism is a question that must be left for subsequent analysis.
56. Alcoff, *Visible Identities*, viii–ix.
57. Fanon, “Fact of Blackness,” 260.

58. Arendt, *Origins of Totalitarianism*, 301.
59. O’Byrne, *Nativity and Finitude*, 95–105. See also Guaraldo, “Public Happiness,” 407.
60. Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 151.
61. Butler, *Notes toward a Performative Theory*, 48.
62. Borren, “Towards an Arendtian Politics,” 213–37; Gündoğdu, *Rightlessness in the Age of Rights*, 139–52; Kubota et al., “Recognizing the Body.”
63. Portmann, *Animal Forms*, 218.
64. Portmann, *Animal Forms*, 86, 162.
65. Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 149.
66. Saito, “Marx in the Anthropocene,” 276–95; Hyvönen, “Labor as Action.”

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