

# The Space Race and Its Discontents: Hannah Arendt on Space, 1951–63

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## Introduction

### Arendt's account of modernity and *The Human Condition* (1958)<sup>1</sup>

Opening the final section of *The Human Condition* (1958), 'The *vita activa* and the modern age', Hannah Arendt references a quote by Franz Kafka:

He found the Archimedean point, but he used it against himself; it seems that he was permitted to find it only under this condition.<sup>2</sup>

With the advent of space flight, humankind had decisively located Archimedes' point—the hypothetical vantage point from which one can view the entire Earth, and perhaps even move it. For Arendt, this event marked the continuation of a centuries-long trend, beginning with Galileo's invention of the telescope, whereby scientific and technological progress alienated humanity from its natural, earthbound existence. In this essay, I will explore two dimensions of Arendt's opposition to the Space Race: firstly, the Space Race as antithetical to humanity's natural, earthbound existence, as embodied by her concept of 'earth alienation'; and, secondly, the Space Race as symbolic of a rejection of human *political* existence, this being exemplified by the civic republicanism of Arendt's ideal polity. Taken together, Arendt's writings on space illuminate her broader theory of the relationship between technology and modernity, for the space race ultimately serves as a metaphor for the technicalisation of modern life, which alienates human beings from the essential realities of the world. Her utopian vision of the modern American republic acts as an antidote to these ills.

This discussion must be located within Arendt's account of modernity and the basic conditions and activities of human life, as outlined in *The Human Condition*. For the purposes of this essay, two of Arendt's basic conditions of human existence are of particular importance. The first of these, the condition of 'plurality', is at the core of her

critique of the Western tradition of political thought since Plato. In opposition to the tendency of political philosophers to fetishise the lone individual, she presents plurality: the fact that 'men, not Man, live on the earth and inhabit the world'.<sup>3</sup> Human plurality is the foundational condition of political life, because politics necessarily takes place in the spaces and interactions between people.<sup>4</sup> The second condition, that of 'natality', is 'the new beginning inherent in birth'.<sup>5</sup> If all politics requires plurality, political *action* is made possible by natality, which reflects the human capacity to take initiative and begin anew, the wellspring of all political acts.

These conditions, plurality and natality, have a close and co-constitutive relationship with the three basic activities of active human life, or the *vita activa*, which Arendt contrasts with the *vita contemplativa*, the life of contemplation. She identifies these activities as follows. Firstly, the activity of *labour*, the natural, cyclical activities undertaken by *animal laborans* (man as a labouring animal) to meet physical and biological needs, for instance by farming crops for consumption. Secondly, the activity of *work*, those 'higher' forms of production through which *homo faber* (man the maker) creates the objects that together comprise the stable, enduring world of human 'artifice'. Finally, the activity of *action*, 'the political activity par excellence', those activities performed in the public realm, with deliberate intent and in concert with others.<sup>6</sup>

Arendt does not put forth a political programme in *The Human Condition*. It was neither intended to present an exhaustive list of the activities undertaken by human beings, nor to make claims about human *nature* as such. This reflects Arendt's view that the activities and conditions of human life are not immutable—in fact, technological developments have the potential to fundamentally disrupt them. She gives the example of future scientific advancements enabling the artificial creation of human life, thereby disrupting the condition of natality, the emergence of life itself.<sup>7</sup> *The Human*

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3 *ibid* 8.

4 *ibid* 176.

5 *ibid* 9.

6 *ibid* 7–8.

7 *ibid* 268–69.

1 Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (first published 1958, University of Chicago Press 1998).

2 *ibid* 248.

*Condition* traces the development of the human condition and its associated activities through the lens of modernity.

Arendt's account of modernity is structured around four key features: world alienation, earth alienation, the rise of the social, and the victory of *animal laborans*. These features reflect two stages in the development of the modern age. The first, from the sixteenth century to the nineteenth, 'corresponds to world alienation and the rise of the social'; the second, from the beginning of the twentieth century, 'corresponds to earth alienation and the victory of *animal laborans*'.<sup>8</sup> While 'world alienation' and 'the rise of the social' are also linked to Arendt's account of the Space Race, this essay will foreground its connection to 'earth alienation' and 'the triumph of *animal laborans*', as the two features of modernity which correspond to the advent of the twentieth century, and which—in contrasting ways—embody the phenomenon of the Space Race.

### Philosophical context

Arendt's understanding of alienation has its origins in the thought of Martin Heidegger, with whom she critically reengaged throughout the 1950s. Although this essay will not explore his philosophical doctrine in detail, two foundational concepts are of critical importance for understanding Arendt's analysis of the Space Race: alienation and disclosure. Alienation refers to Heidegger's belief that formal or technical modes of thought, as found in scientific and technical disciplines, estrange human beings from the object they seek to understand.<sup>9</sup> This prevents them from knowing 'Being', understood as the unknowable source that emanates from all beings, including human beings. Conversely, disclosure refers to Heidegger's belief that humans can only know Being when they stop attempting to force knowledge of it through formal and technical means.<sup>10</sup> Only then will Being 'disclose' itself to them.

Arendt's interpretation of alienation is particularly relevant to Part 1 of this essay; her reworking of Heidegger's theory of disclosure is central to Part 2. This reflects the fact that many political and historical phenomena, including the Space Race, can become allegories for alienation and disclosure. Within this framework, Part 1 will analyse the Space Race as a rebellion against humanity's natural, earthbound existence, with particular reference to the concepts of earth alienation and the triumph of *animal laborans*.

## 1. The Space Race as a rebellion against humanity's natural, earthbound existence

### Situating the Space Race

Earth alienation refers to humanity's attempts to escape from the 'shackles of earth-bound experience', as demonstrated by the drive towards the conquest and exploration of space.<sup>11</sup> Given that the Earth 'is the very quintessence of the human condition', it is perhaps unsurprising that in the prologue to *The Human Condition*, Arendt calls the 1957 launch of the first artificial satellite, Sputnik I, an event 'second in importance to no other, not even to the splitting of the atom'.<sup>12</sup> Yet her account of the relationship between the Space

Race and earth alienation must be situated within her thought on science and technology.

In the cultural discourse of France, West Germany, and the United States—the countries in which Arendt 'spent significant amounts of time during the 1950s'<sup>13</sup>—the thorny problem of technology, and humanity's ability to control its growing technological powers, was a recurring theme. In *Einführung in die Metaphysik* (1953), the published version of lectures given in 1935, Heidegger praises National Socialism for staging an 'encounter between global technology and modern humanity'.<sup>14</sup> He analogises the USA and USSR to technology, and Germany to modern humanity. Although Arendt departs, of course, from her mentor's invidious comparison between the United States and Germany, she shares his concern with technology 'as a feature of modernity',<sup>15</sup> as do many other twentieth century theorists with whom she is critically engaged, including Max Weber and Karl Jaspers.

Arendt's concern with the Space Race as earth alienation therefore reflects a broader problem with which she, with Heidegger, was consistently preoccupied: the 'technicalisation' of modern life. This term refers to the 'growing artificiality', driven by technological development, which was replacing humanity's natural environs with man-made artifice.<sup>16</sup> In the twentieth century, existing debates about technicalisation were revived by key developments of modernity:<sup>17</sup> automation,<sup>18</sup> space flight, and nuclear fission, with its potential to provide a limitless energy source or 'destroy all organic life on earth'.<sup>19</sup> In the post-war era of 'Big Science', with vast amounts of government funding funnelled into scientific research, a sense of technological possibility abounded.<sup>20</sup> However, this sense of possibility was both utopian and dystopian, as reflected in the contrasting cases of astrofuturism and Arendt's thought on technology.

### Astrofuturism: A contrast case

Astrofuturism, a genre of science fiction writing and expression of utopian dreaming, developed in American intellectual and popular culture after World War II, although its historical roots lie in nineteenth-century imperialism and the myth of the colonial 'frontier'.<sup>21</sup> Its central preoccupation is with 'an escape from terrestrial history' by eschewing humanity's earthly limitations for the final frontier of space.<sup>22</sup> As with the Space Race and the atomic age, there exists a tension between war and peace in astrofuturism, which encompasses visions of American space colonisation—evident in the militaristic fantasies of authors like Robert Heinlein—as well as the 'utopian, socialist hopes' of contemporary

13 Waseem Yaqoob, 'The Archimedean point: Science and technology in the thought of Hannah Arendt, 1951–1963' (2014) 44(3) *Journal of European Studies* 199, 204.

14 *ibid.* 204.

15 *ibid.* 204.

16 d'Entreves (n 8) 1.

17 Benjamin Lazier, 'Earthrise, or the Globalization of the World Picture' (2011) 116(3) *American Historical Review* 602, 604.

18 Brian Simbirski, 'Cybernetic Muse: Hannah Arendt on Automation, 1951–1958' (2016) 77(4) *Journal of the History of Ideas* 589, 590.

19 Arendt (n 1) 148–50.

20 Malisa Kurtz, 'Utopia...: Science Fiction in the 1950s and 1960s' in Eric Carl Link and Gerry Canavan (eds), *The Cambridge History of Science Fiction* (Cambridge University Press 2018) 201–02.

21 De Witt Douglas Kilgore, 'Introduction: The Wonderful Dream' in De Witt Douglas Kilgore, *Astrofuturism: Science, Race, and Visions of Utopia in Space* (University of Pennsylvania Press 2003) 1.

22 *ibid.* 1–2.

8 Maurizio Passerin d'Entreves, 'Hannah Arendt' in *The Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy* (Fall edn, 2019).

9 Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time* (John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson trs, SCM Press 1962) 91–107.

10 *ibid.* 256–69.

11 Arendt (n 1) 265–67.

12 *ibid.* 1–2.

astrofuturists like Kim Stanley Robinson.<sup>23</sup> Central to all astrofuturism, however, is the ideology of ‘techno-utopianism’: the belief that technological progress is both imminent and a potential cure for social, political, and economic ills on Earth.<sup>24</sup> As Imre Szeman notes, techno-utopian discourse is ‘employed by government officials, environmentalists, and scientists from across the political spectrum’, as well as by astrofuturists.<sup>25</sup>

Astrofuturism and techno-utopianism significantly influenced, and were influenced by, the Space Race. Their utopian vision thus offers a useful context and contrast case for Arendt’s more dystopian thought on science and technology. Space, for Arendt, is far from an astrofuturistic ‘site of renewal’.<sup>26</sup> While she does not believe a reversal of existing technology is possible or desirable,<sup>27</sup> her writings, from *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951) to *The Human Condition* (1958) to ‘The Conquest of Space and the Stature of Man’ (1963), reflect two major concerns about modern technology: firstly, that humanity’s lack of control over its rapidly developing technological powers may spell catastrophe, and secondly, that, in the modern age, the natural is gradually being subordinated to the artificial and technical, facilitating the rise of consumer society.<sup>28</sup>

### The Space Race as earth alienation

Arendt understands the Space Race as the culmination of a deeply rooted tendency within modern scientific and technical knowledge. This view is also reflected in her treatment of nuclear power, which supports her diagnosis of the alienating consequences of modern technology. As Brent Ryan Bellamy writes, in contrast to the techno-utopian discourse surrounding space flight and nuclear energy, the militarisation of both phenomena with the development of atomic bombs and intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) returned ‘terror ... to the technological object’.<sup>29</sup> Arendt’s worries, however, are ontologically oriented. She is less concerned by the destructive power of nuclear technology than by its tendency to divorce ‘technical capability from social understanding’.<sup>30</sup> The inability of the general public to understand nuclear technology makes ‘conscious’, informed decisions about its use difficult, if not impossible.<sup>31</sup> For Arendt, this is an example of what happens when technical knowledge is divorced from ordinary speaking and thinking.

Arendt’s second concern, relating to the triumph of the ‘artificial’ and the technicalisation of modernity, is embodied by the Space Race as the pinnacle of earth alienation. She traces the origins of earth alienation to Galileo’s invention of the telescope in 1609, which first alienated ‘man from his immediate earthly surroundings’.<sup>32</sup> With Galileo’s discovery of the Archimedean point, human beings, now capable of imagining themselves at a vast distance from Earth (see fig 1), began to feel that they were

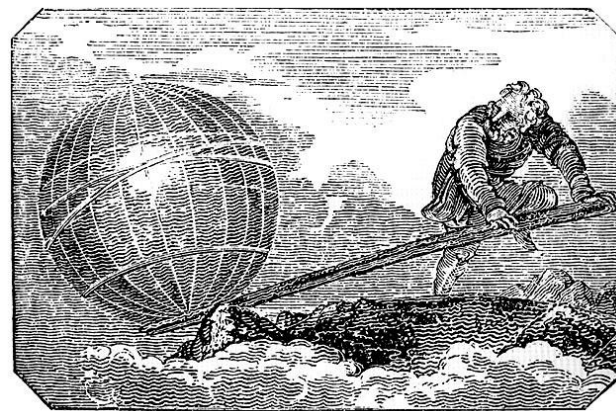


Fig 1. Archimedes’ lever (unknown, *Mechanics Magazine* 1824). Annenberg Rare Book and Manuscript Library, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, USA. Wikimedia Commons. <[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lever#/media/File:Archimedes\\_lever\\_\(Small\).jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lever#/media/File:Archimedes_lever_(Small).jpg)> accessed 8 June 2021.

‘terrestrial not by nature’ but only by chance.<sup>33</sup> To leave Earth behind seemed fitting of their true nature as ‘universal beings’.<sup>34</sup> This is the phenomenon of earth alienation.

The crucial result of the discovery of the Archimedean point, then, was a rebellion against aspects of the human condition which were previously ‘earthbound and subject to contingency’.<sup>35</sup> This event marked the beginning of earth alienation and, in fuelling the corresponding development of the natural sciences and astrophysics, led to the technological advances which, many centuries later, gave birth to nuclear fission and the Space Race. The Space Race both embodies and facilitates earth alienation, and its use of technology to escape Earth is symbolic of the triumph of the ‘artificial’ over the ‘natural’. For Arendt, this is evident in the creation of ‘new heavenly bodies’ in the form of satellites like Sputnik I<sup>36</sup> and in the astrofuturist dream of space colonisation. The central figure in Arendt’s analysis is, of course, the astronaut. As she writes in ‘The Conquest of Space and the Stature of Man’, which was published after the departure of USSR probes to the Moon in 1959, and the launch of the first American satellite in 1962:

The astronaut, shot into outer space and imprisoned in his instrument-ridden capsule where each actual physical encounter with his surroundings would spell immediate death, might well be taken as the symbolic incarnation of Heisenberg’s man — the man who will be the less likely ever to meet anything but himself and man-made things the more ardently he wishes to eliminate all anthropocentric considerations from his encounter with the non-human world around him.<sup>37</sup>

Here it is appropriate that Arendt should treat the astronaut as a ‘symbol’. Lying behind her portrait of a man cut-off from the world by man-made instruments, we catch a glimpse of Heidegger’s metaphysical account of how technical knowledge alienates man

<sup>23</sup> *ibid* 1–2.

<sup>24</sup> Kurtz (n 20) 202.

<sup>25</sup> Imre Szeman, ‘Oil, Futurity, and the Anticipation of Disaster’ (2007) 106(4) *South Atlantic Quarterly* 812.

<sup>26</sup> Kilgore (n 21) 2.

<sup>27</sup> Yaqoob (n 13) 207.

<sup>28</sup> Arendt (n 1) 268–69.

<sup>29</sup> Brent Ryan Bellamy, ‘...or Bust: Science Fiction and the Bomb, 1945–1960’ in Eric Carl Link and Gerry Canavan (eds), *The Cambridge History of Science Fiction* (Cambridge University Press 2018) 220.

<sup>30</sup> Simbirski (n 18) 594.

<sup>31</sup> *ibid* 595.

<sup>32</sup> Arendt (n 1) 251.

<sup>33</sup> *ibid* 263.

<sup>34</sup> *ibid* 263.

<sup>35</sup> Yaqoob (n 13) 211.

<sup>36</sup> Arendt (n 1) 268–69.

<sup>37</sup> Hannah Arendt, ‘The Conquest of Space and the Stature of Man’ (first published 1963; *The New Atlantis*, Fall 2007) 1 <<https://www.thenewatlantis.com/publications/the-conquest-of-space-and-the-stature-of-man>>.

from 'Being'. Arendt's critique of the Space Race, particularly as it relates to the supremacy of technical language and instruments over the natural world and ordinary language (as in the above passage), can be viewed as an allegory for Heidegger's concepts of Being and alienation, as outlined in the introduction to this essay. The Space Race, as the embodiment of earth alienation, is the highest form of Heideggerian alienation. Earth itself is a symbol of Being, while the artificial technologies of the Space Race and the atomic age are symbols of the alienation of knowledge from Being—and, ultimately, of humanity's disconnect from the primal reality of the world, for this is how Arendt conceptualises 'Being'.<sup>38</sup>

As the logical outcome of earth alienation, Arendt's Space Race marks a key event in the technicalisation of modernity: the gradual replacement of humanity's natural surroundings with the man-made and the artificial. Crucially, for Arendt, technicalisation is not inherently undesirable.<sup>39</sup> Human artifice has 'strongly positive connotations' for her, as the reflection of *homo faber's* capacity for invention and in the classical tradition, which equates human artifice with civilisation.<sup>40</sup> The great danger of technicalisation, however, is that it accelerates *existing patterns of consumption*. The logical result of this acceleration is that society will eventually be subsumed by 'an enormously intensified life process'—an infinite process of production and consumption—until a 'true consumers' society' dominates.<sup>41</sup>

As a result of her deep commitment to the idea that human beings are tethered to the Being from which they devolve, Arendt views the conditions of human existence as fundamentally *worldly*, where the world acts as a proxy for the notion of Being. It is for this reason that Arendt argues that the colonisation of space would pose 'the most radical change' imaginable to the human condition.<sup>42</sup> As the embodiment of earth alienation, the Space Race represents, for Arendt, a rejection of humanity's *natural, earthbound* existence—understood as humanity's attachment to Being—and thus a rejection of the capacity of the human being to be at home in the world. This is the fundamental thought that lies behind her idea that the Space Race symbolises the triumph of the artificial over the natural, which is itself characteristic of the technicalisation of modernity and the rise of consumer society.

### The Space Race as the triumph of *animal laborans*

At the same time, however, Arendt also puts forth a differing conception of the 'natural-artificial' dichotomy as it relates to modernity, and here the Space Race plays a different role. In this account, modernity 'has brought us too close to nature ... by elevating labor ... to the highest point within the *vita activa*'.<sup>43</sup> Labour is the most natural of human activities because it exists to fulfil our base biological needs. Its rise over work and action is the phenomenon which Arendt labels 'the triumph of *animal laborans*', the second defining feature of modernity since the twentieth century. Her account of the relationship between labour, nature, and modernity must be understood in relation to her history of modern science, as outlined in 'The *vita activa* and the modern age', the final section of *The Human Condition*.

38 Margaret Canovan, *Hannah Arendt: A Reinterpretation of her Political Thought* (Cambridge University Press 1992).

39 Arendt (n 1) 132.

40 Canovan (n 38) 109.

41 Arendt (n 1) 132–33.

42 *ibid* 10.

43 d'Entreves (n 8) 1.



Fig 2. Earthrise (William Anders 1968). National Aeronautics and Space Administration, Washington, DC, USA. Wikimedia Commons. <<https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:NASA-Apollo8-Dec24-Earthrise.jpg>> accessed 8 June 2021.

Here, Arendt posits a relationship between 'science, secularization and the emergence of modern politics'.<sup>44</sup> She argues that, from the sixteenth century onward, the development of the natural sciences supported secularisation by undermining popular faith in the divine. Secularism and the precepts of the natural sciences became the foundation of modern politics and philosophies of history. She finds evidence of this in Karl Marx's dialectical materialism, which justifies 'experimental interventions' into society guided by natural laws.<sup>45</sup> Crucially, it is also demonstrated by the victory of labour, the only activity within the *vita activa* which is driven by an eternal, cyclical 'process' much like the processes of the natural sciences.<sup>46</sup>

This account of secularisation and modernisation is pessimistic, a fact exemplified by Arendt's treatment of the Space Race. In this alternative account of modernity, the Space Race represents a rejection not of humanity's natural, earthbound existence, but of *human consciousness* as it currently exists. From the distance of the Archimedean point, all human activity resembles a 'large-scale biological process', akin to watching the operations of an ant colony from a great height, rather than the result of deliberate human and cultural innovation.<sup>47</sup> With the publication of *Earthrise* in 1968, a decade after Arendt's publication of *The Human Condition*, the Archimedean point became image (see fig 2). This reduction of human life to a process signals the triumph of labour, that eternal biological process, over work and action.

Arendt finds two repercussions following from this account of labour and the Space Race highly concerning. The first of these is that a species of labourers, as humanity will become, lacks the judgment necessary to control its growing technological powers. Her second concern—that the transcendental nature of space travel might disrupt the human psyche—filtered into the popular culture of the era. In his short story 'The Dead Astronaut', JG Ballard writes

44 Yaqoob (n 13) 200.

45 *ibid* 200.

46 Arendt (n 1) 308–16.

47 Arendt (n 37) 1.

of relic hunters who collect the mummified corpses of astronauts killed in orbit, treasuring the remains like ‘the saintly bones of medieval shrines’.<sup>48</sup> Yet the remains of a NASA astronaut turn out to be radioactive—he ‘was carrying an atomic weapon!’<sup>49</sup> Ballard’s tale of cursed bones echoes premodern superstitions about the ‘reckless handling of sacred objects’, rewritten for the space age.<sup>50</sup> It is possible to imagine an Arendtian reading of Ballard’s dead astronauts, cut off from life by their instrumental cocoons, but Ballard’s gore seems to owe more to Mary Shelley than Martin Heidegger.

Other writers of the period rejected Arendt and Ballard’s pessimism. Although not explicitly, these writers are often ‘thinking with Arendt against Arendt’.<sup>51</sup> They deploy her categories of natality and plurality—the miracle of life and plural human existence—to argue that in (temporarily) leaving Earth behind, human beings’ connection to their home and one another is strengthened, rather than disrupted. The publication of *Earthrise* (see fig 2) energised these responses, as captured by a line from Archibald MacLeish’s ‘Riders on the Earth’ (1968):

To see the earth as it truly is, small and blue and beautiful in that eternal silence where it floats, is to see ourselves as riders on the earth together, brothers on that bright loveliness in the eternal cold—brothers who know now they are truly brothers.<sup>52</sup>

### Ambiguities in Arendt’s account of modernity

Ultimately, Arendt reconciles her contrasting accounts of modernity by labelling them a paradox: the triumph of *animal laborans* over *homo faber* and *zoon politikon* (the political animal) has transformed human beings into ‘human animals unconscious of their capacities and responsibilities’.<sup>53</sup> Such a species is ill suited to exercise the ‘earth-threatening powers’ bestowed upon it by technological development and earth alienation.<sup>54</sup> Nevertheless, Arendt’s assessment of modernity, the role of ‘nature’ within it, and the relationship of the Space Race to the ‘artificial/natural’ dichotomy retains a fundamental ambiguity. The modern era is both ‘too natural and too artificial’—<sup>55</sup>not only in a paradoxical sense, but in a manner which obscures the boundaries of the categories of ‘nature’ and ‘artifice’ themselves.

Arendt’s concern with the Space Race also contains a strongly normative element. The Space Race is anathema to her ideal of human political existence. This is because action, particularly action as a *spatially grounded phenomenon*, is integral to Arendt’s conception of ‘the good life’. In *The Human Condition*, she does not explicitly link the Space Race to her account of action and the public realm. As such, while Part 1 of this essay was drawn directly from Arendt’s writings on the Space Race and modernity, Part 2 is my own interpretation, and aims to elucidate the full implications of the Space Race for Arendt’s ideal of human political existence. It might

48 JG Ballard, *The Dead Astronaut: 10 Stories of Space Flight* (Playboy Press 1968) 2.

49 *ibid* 6.

50 Umberto Rossi, ‘A Little Something about Dead Astronauts’ (2009) 36(1) *Science Fiction Studies* 101, 107.

51 Patchen Markell, ‘Arendt, Hannah (1906–75)’ in *The Encyclopedia of Political Thought* (2014).

52 (as quoted in Denis Cosgrove, *Apollo’s Eye: A Cartographic Genealogy of the Earth in the Western Imagination* (Johns Hopkins University Press 2001) 259.

53 Margaret Canovan, ‘Introduction’ in Arendt (n 1) x–xi.

54 *ibid* x–xi.

55 d’Entreves (n 8) 1.

thereby contribute to existing bodies of literature examining her writings on technology and modern politics.<sup>56</sup>

## 2. The Space Race as antithetical to Arendt’s ideal of human political existence

### Action and the public realm in Arendt’s ideal polity

Kei Hiruta rejects the common narrative that Arendt is an anti-utopian thinker.<sup>57</sup> Arendt belongs to a group of émigré intellectuals and liberal critics of totalitarianism, including Isaiah Berlin, Jacob Talmon, and Karl Popper, who argue that the utopian impulse is inherently totalitarian because the utopian ‘blueprint’ demands the punishment or eradication of all that fails to meet its impossible standards.<sup>58</sup> While Arendt certainly rejects the blueprint narrative of the classical utopian tradition, Hiruta argues that her writings display another kind of utopian dreaming, which consists of ‘an imaginative and idealized reconstruction of existing polities’.<sup>59</sup> For Arendt, this ideal polity is the modern American republic, reimagined in the civic republican tradition of thinkers from the ancient Greeks to Montesquieu and Alexis de Tocqueville. America’s primary appeal is that it enables its citizens to live ‘the good life’ in Arendt’s understanding of the term, within which public political participation is central.

Politics, in this account, is the process of active civic engagement in the public realm. The public realm is the site where many unique individuals meet and act together to begin things anew, thus reflecting the conditions of plurality and natality. Action in the public realm symbolises hope and possibility. This is why the meaning of action, for Arendt, is exemplified by moments of revolution—she often references the American Revolution and the Hungarian Revolution of 1956—where the enactment of something new lays the foundation for the attainment of greater freedom. However, freedom, in Arendt’s account, is not freedom of choice in the liberal tradition. It is the capacity to do something new or unexpected, thereby actualising the condition of natality, the miracle of life itself.<sup>60</sup>

Action is not without its drawbacks, and *The Human Condition* should not be read as a treatise on its assets relative to labour and work. Just as Max Weber draws attention to the irreversible and unintended consequences which result from political action, Arendt notes that action is ‘boundless’ and ‘unpredictable’.<sup>61</sup> Nevertheless, the public realm is of profound importance to Arendt because of the benefits which accrue to the individual, political life, and to human civilisation, from human beings acting together in the public realm. For the individual, action in the public realm is a crucial means of disclosing one’s identity—that which makes a person ‘who’ they are.<sup>62</sup> For political life, action is essential: it is the means by which human beings constitute political communities, develop a sense of political agency, and form opinions and judgements in concert with

56 Canovan (n 38); d’Entreves (n 8); Kei Hiruta, ‘An “Anti-Utopian Age?” Isaiah Berlin’s England, Hannah Arendt’s America, and Utopian Thinking in Dark Times’ (2017) 22(1) *Journal of Political Ideologies* 12; Markell (n 51); Simbirski (n 18); Yaqoob (n 13).

57 Hiruta (n 56).

58 *ibid* 12–13.

59 *ibid* 12.

60 d’Entreves (n 8) 1.

61 Arendt (n 1) 192.

62 *ibid* 178.

the diverse perspectives of their peers.<sup>63</sup> For human civilisation, the public realm enables the remembrance of great deeds, words, and individuals long gone, and it functions as the ‘locus of a civilisation that transcends generations’.<sup>64</sup>

Some of the themes implicit in these benefits—the ability of the individual to shape politics through action, the centrality of political agency, and the importance of remembrance—should be understood in light of twentieth-century experiences of war and persecution. These led to a revival of ‘anti-materialist, epic and tragic values’ in many émigré intellectuals, including Arendt.<sup>65</sup>

Yet the most important characteristic of the public realm, for Arendt, is that only in the public realm can *reality disclose itself*. As Margaret Canovan notes, the critical importance of the disclosure of reality to Arendt must be situated within two contexts.<sup>66</sup> The first of these is *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, where Arendt highlights an open public realm as a necessary site of resistance to the ‘ideological fictions’ of totalitarian regimes.<sup>67</sup> The second is her intellectual engagement with Heidegger, who claims that Being is disclosed in those spaces that people create together, when individuals stop thinking about Being using formal and technical instruments. The difference between humans and animals lies in this ‘unique human capacity for experiencing reality in its fullness’.<sup>68</sup> Arendt’s theory of action, then, should be read as an allegory for the suspension of formal thought that allows Being to disclose itself to humans. With this allegory, Arendt de-alienates humans from the world and one another. In her account of action as it relates to politics, then, politics is a de-alienated ‘relatedness to others’, to oneself, and to Earth.<sup>69</sup>

Specific to Arendt’s account of disclosure is her new definition of the ‘space’ in which reality discloses itself. Heidegger was uninterested in participatory politics, but for Arendt the space of disclosure is the public realm, formed by the discourse and action of plural human beings. In other words, reality can only be disclosed in a free and open political realm—‘the opposite of the regime to which Heidegger gave his support’.<sup>70</sup> In her chapter on ‘Action’ in *The Human Condition*, Arendt focuses on the transformative importance of disclosure to the individual. Their own reality, identity, and sense of self as a unique individual, in contrast to the homogeneity of *animal laborans*, can only be affirmed through interactions with their fellows in the public realm.<sup>71</sup> Without this, human beings are ‘deprived of things essential to a truly human life’.<sup>72</sup> Seen in this light, in treating political action as the condition of self- and world-disclosure, Arendt locates participatory politics as the great antidote to the technological alienation of human beings from the world that she allegorises to the Space Race. The Space Race should be viewed as antithetical to Arendt’s ideal polity because its technological basis threatens to disrupt the existence of the public realm, and thus the disclosure of reality.

### The Space Race as antithetical to the public realm

In the space age of the 1950s–1960s, informed by a sense of

technological possibility and such discourses as astrofuturism, humanity’s colonisation of space was viable, even imminent. As late as 1974, the front page of *The New York Times* declared ‘Proposal for Human Colonies in Space is Hailed by Scientists as Feasible Now’.<sup>73</sup> Within this context, the Space Race disrupts the existence of a different kind of space to the space of Being, namely the *physical* space of the public realm. The public realm has two core features: the ‘space of appearance’ and the existence of a ‘common world’. The *polis*, or space of appearance, is not a physical location but a space for action which is created and re-created by the interactions between individuals. The *polis* requires, however, a physical foundation from which this space of appearance can emerge: a ‘common world’, involving physical and temporal proximity between people and their shared world of artifice.<sup>74</sup> People must meet with one another, in physical spaces and institutions, to hear one another’s opinions, discuss and debate political issues, and act in concert to achieve political goals. Spatiality is central to the ‘common world’, and thus also to the public realm, to Arendt’s conception of citizenship, and to her ideal of political life. The Space Race, therefore, is antithetical to Arendt’s ideal of humanity’s political existence—antithetical to her utopia, although she would not have termed it as such.

### Conclusion

This essay has explored two dimensions of Hannah Arendt’s critical writings on the Space Race: firstly, the Space Race as a rejection of humanity’s natural, earthbound existence, as embodied by the concept of ‘earth alienation’; and, secondly, that the Space Race is antithetical to her ideal polity—as exemplified by the modern American republic—because it serves as an allegory for the technological disruption of the public realm and the disclosure of reality. The Archimedean point, located by the astronauts of the Cold War Space Race, threatened to alienate human beings from the reality of Being, the Earth, and one another—a dystopian prospect indeed.

63 d’Entreves (n 8) 1.

64 Canovan (n 38) 111.

65 *ibid* 139–40.

66 *ibid* 110–12.

67 *ibid* 111.

68 *ibid* 112.

69 Arendt (n 1) 210.

70 Canovan (n 38) 112.

71 Arendt (n 1) 208.

72 *ibid* 58.

73 Walter Sullivan, ‘Proposal for Human Colonies in Space is Hailed by Scientists as Feasible Now’ *The New York Times* (New York, 13 May 1974) 1.

74 Arendt (n 1) 198–99.