Animal Laborans, Homo Faber

or

The Shattering and Reconstruction of a Rock

Introduction

Hannah Arendt introduced the dichotomy of *animal laborans* and *homo faber* alongside the respective distinction of labor and craftsmanship* in her 1958 book *The Human Condition*. These terms form pairs, the name of the protagonist respectively defined through their activities. Yet, *animal laborans* and *homo faber* are concepts that exist alongside each other in every person. Still, there exists a hierarchy between them in Arendt's work: *homo faber* is imagined as a superior of *animal laborans* who is not only concerned with sustaining his life but also with changing his surroundings to better suit himself. Letting *animal laborans* be absorbed by his work without the guidance of *homo faber* questioning the purpose of the endeavor was posing a risk to Arendt. This is best exemplified by the example Richard Sennet uses in his 2008 work *The Craftsman* to illustrate this risk: the atomic bomb, perceived by Robert Oppenheimer as a "sweet" [Sennett, p. 6], technical problem to be solved rather than acknowledging its implication for the public.

This however falls short of the reality of manual labor for Sennett who emphasizes the role of the work-process, or the *How?* of craftsmanship, in informing the *Why?*, which was thought to be a domain of *homo faber*. Thus, the hierarchy mentioned above is partly reversed, with labor guiding the craftsperson toward its purpose instead of the other way around.

*"work" which is used in Arendt's book will be replaced here in order to be less ambiguous

Labor is the activity which corresponds to the biological process of the human body, whose spontaneous growth, metabolism, and eventual decay are bound to the vital necessities produced and fed into the life process by labor. […]
Work is the activity which corresponds to the unnaturalness of human existence, which is not embedded in, and whose mortality is not compensated by, the species' ever-recurring life cycle. Work provides an "artificial" world of things, distinctly different from all natural surroundings. Within its borders each individual life is housed, while all this world itself is meant to outlast and transcend them all.

Arendt, p. 7

Whereas animal laborans *is fixated in the question "How?",* homo faber *asks "Why?". This division seems to me false because it slights the practical man or woman at work. The human animal who is* animal laborans *is capable of thinking; the discussions the producer holds may be mentally with materials rather than with other people; people working together certainly talk to one another about what they are doing. Another, more balanced view is that thinking and feeling are contained within the process of making.*

Sennett, p. 7

The structure of the present paper will be that of a dialogue with the referenced literature. Excerpts are presented next to my own comments and interpretations, linking the pieces of information together. The paper is organized into two main parts, which will further examine the terms mentioned above, in two sections each: The first section will concern itself with the myth of Sisyphos, who was punished for his scorn for the gods by being forced to roll a stone up a steep hill, only to see it plummet down into the valley again. The fate of this classical figure was interpreted in many ways. Some of them make him a prime example for the dullness of the life of *animal laborans*, yet others imagine his situation as less dire and grant him some agency when it comes to his attempted instrumentalization by the gods, an act that can be attributed to *homo faber*.

The second section will examine the respective domains of *animal laborans* and *homo faber*, labor and craftsmanship. These terms will be interpreted in the light of Hannah Arendt's work. As a supplement to those two aspects of human working lives, a last chapter will approach the theme of inequalities between accumulating wealth and earned income as a possible source of the problematic situation of *animal laborans*.

Additionally, a short chapter will explain how this paper and the corresponding work fit together.

Sisyphos as Animal Laborans

Sisyphos often serves as a cautionary tale of the pointlessness seemingly inherent to the life of *animal laborans* or similar figures. Interesting about the use of this metaphor is that the Sisyphos encountered amongst the living is anything but a dull person. Indeed, Sisyphos is very aware of his surroundings, as evidenced in the different tales of the actions that ultimately led to his punishment in Tartaros. He constantly tries to turn the tide of events to his favor, not losing hope for a positive outcome.

Sisyphus, we are told, excelled all other men in knavery and ingenuity, and by means of his skill in divination by inspection of victims he discovered everything that was to happen and foretold it to mankind.

Diodorus: Library IV, 6.6.3

According to the fabulous story told by Pherecydes Sisyphus made known to Asopus that it was Zeus who had carried off his daughter Aegina; in punishment for which offence the god sent Death against the babbler; but Sisyphus bound Death fast, so that men ceased to die, until Ares came to the rescue, released Death, and gave Sisyphus into his power. Before he died, however, Sisyphus directed his wife Merope to omit his funeral rites, so that Hades, being deprived of his customary offerings, was persuaded by the cunning trickster to let him go back to life in order to complain of his wife's neglect. But, once in the upper world, he refused to return, and had to be fetched back by Hermes.

Aeschylus II, p.457 (Sisyphus the Runaway, Sisyphus the Stone-Roller)

Sisyphus and Salmoneus, sons of Aeolus, hated each other. Sisyphus asked Apollo how he might kill his enemy, meaning his brother, and the answer was given that if he had children from the embrace of Tryo, daughter of his brother Salmoneus, they would avenge him. When Sisyphus followed this advice, two sons were born, but their mother slew them when she learned of the prophecy.

Hyginus: Fabulae LX, 60

Those repeated transgressions earned Sisyphos the ire of the gods—Zeus especially—and his eternal punishment. Here, Odysseus visits him on his way to consult Tiresias in the underworld of Hades. Sisyphos is now trapped in his endless work that so defies his character. Here, he is robbed of the act of contextualizing his work as it is not serving any purpose he strives for. For him, rolling the stone is only an operative task. And still, in Odysseus' document, Sisyphos doesn't (or cannot) display utter defeat at the hands of his overwhelming task but rather shows grim resolve in his work.

Ultimately, this is why Sisyphos can be seen as an allegory for the *animal laborans*: The structural problems associated with forcing people into unqualified, repetitive work are here replaced by the frame of Tartaros—a place Sisyphos seemingly can't escape. In addition, also Sisyphos seems unable to set down the stone and spend his time idling in the underworld. Whether this is due to the nature of Tartaros or it is his way of defying the gods once more—declaring their punishment insufficient—by one way or the other, Sisyphos stays bound to his stone.

[Odysseus speaking] Aye, and I saw Sisyphus in violent torment, seeking to raise a monstrous stone with both his hands. Verily he would brace himself with hands and feet, and thrust the stone toward the crest of a hill, but as often as he was about to heave it over the top, the weight would turn it back, and then down again to the plain would come rolling the ruthless stone. But he would strain again and thrust it back, and the sweat flowed down from his limbs, and dust rose up from his head.

Homer: Odyssey, 593

Labor

In Hannah Arendt's work, labor is the domain of *animal laborans*. Labor describes any work that does not strive to alter the surroundings of the one performing it, but to sustain them. Thus, it is characterized not by the product remaining in the world after the work is done but by the process of doing the work itself. This process is what *animal laborans* is truly concerned with. The laborer gives in to the rhythms that govern the working process: The rhythms of their body and metabolism, requiring sustenance, and the rhythm of the machines, requiring to move alongside them.

Leaving all other dimensions of a human aside, a logical consequence of this is seeing laborers as machines when it comes to their workforce. Such "machines" may then also be optimized in terms of their efficiency. *The Principles of Scientific Management* by Frederick Winslow Taylor addresses exactly this kind of optimization when its overall goal is stated in the introduction of the book. A sense of responsibility can be felt when reading the 1911 fragment, yet throughout, the laborer is degraded to a means that is to be used well by the management.

Taylor then devises an outline of which steps were performed by the management of a construction business, providing a blueprint on how to implement them in similar enterprises. These four steps further the impression gained in the above segment. An interesting aspect of the text is that the human laborers are thought of having to conform to the working process devised by their superiors and that a "first class man" is

[…] it is no longer the body's movement that determines the implement's movement but the machine's movement which enforces the movements of the body. The point is that nothing can be mechanizes more easily and less artificially than the rhythm of the labor process, which in its turn corresponds to the equally automatic repetitive rhythm of the life process and its metabolism with nature. Precisely because the animal laborans *does not use tools and instruments in order to build a world but in order to ease the labors of its own life process, it has lived literally in a world of machines ever since the industrial revolution […]*

Arendt, p. 156

The principal object of management should be to secure the maximum prosperity for the employer, coupled with the maximum prosperity for each employee.
[…] maximum prosperity for each employee means not only higher wages than are usually received by men of his class, but, of more importance still, it also means the development of each man to his state of maximum efficiency, so that he may be able to do, generally speaking, the highest grade of work for which his natural abilities fit him, and it further means giving him, when possible, this class of work to do.

Taylor, p. 5

First. The development (by the management, not the workman) of the science of bricklaying, with rigid rules for each motion of every man, and the perfection and standardization of all implements and working conditions.
Second. The careful selection and subsequent training of the bricklayers into first-class men, and the elimination of all men who refuse to or are unable to adopt the best methods.

one who is particularly suited to adopting this way of working. The one ideal way of working thus demanding the one ideal laborer, the perfect machine to perform the stated algorithm well. This indicates a state and image of labor as something completely devoid of individual engagement. The labor here is simply not thought of as a dignified line of work one could be compelled to do well for its own sake. Like that, personal habits and unique ways of working lose their significance as they are mostly imagined as a means of avoiding work and performance, not something used in order to perform better—a goal that can seemingly only be set by the management.

Third. Bringing the first-class bricklayer and the science of bricklaying together, through the constant help and watchfulness of the management, and through paying each man a large daily bonus for working fast and doing what he is told to do. Fourth. An almost equal division of the work and responsibility between the workman and the management. All day long the management work almost side by side with the men, helping, encouraging, and smoothing the way for them, while in the past they stood one side, gave the men but little help, and threw on to them almost the entire responsibility as to methods, implements, speed, and harmonious cooperation.

Taylor, p. 78

Sisyphos as Homo Faber

Albert Camus' *absurd man* is living in a world that does not make any sense to him, so he tries to make the best of it. Recognizing that his life is insignificant he doesn't choose to end his life but sets out to make it his own as much as he can, accepting the consequences this might entail.

In classical literature, Sisyphos is described as a clever and cunning person. His punishment is clearly a mockery of this, most defining, attribute of his. For all his ingenuity, he'll now only be doing a dull, hard and ultimately senseless kind of work. Camus visits Sisyphos on his way down to the valley, just after the stone he rolled up thundered down-hill again, to be picked up by him later. In this time, Sisyphos briefly reclaims the agency the gods are trying to take from him through his punishment.

What, in fact, is the absurd man? He who, without negating it, does nothing for the eternal. Not that nostalgia is foreign to him. But he prefers his courage and his reasoning. The first teaches him to live without appeal and to get along with what he has; the second informs him of his limits. Assured of his temporally limited freedom, of his revolt devoid of future, and of his mortal consciousness, he lives out his adventure within the span of his lifetime. That is his field, that is his action, which he shields from any judgment but his own.

Camus, p. 43

That hour like a breathing-space which returns as surely as his suffering, that is the hour of consciousness. At each of those moments when he leaves the heights and gradually sinks toward the lairs of the gods, he is superior to his fate. He is stronger than his rock.

If this myth is tragic, that is because its hero is conscious. Where would his torture be, indeed, if at every step the hope of succeeding upheld him? The workman of today works every day in his life at the same tasks, and this fate is no less absurd. But it is tragic only at the rare moments when it becomes conscious. Sisyphus, proletarian of the gods, powerless and rebellious, knows the whole extent of his wretched condition: it is what he thinks of during his descent. The lucidity that was to constitute his torture at the same time crowns his victory. There is no fate that cannot be surmounted by scorn.

Camus, p. 76

But for Camus, Sisyphos is fascinating because of his past as much as his present punishment. Sisyphos, in his mind, is somewhat content with his fate as it provides the conclusion of a life lived on his own terms. Thus, his punishment becomes a document of his deliberation, not the mere loss of it.

Naranath Bhranthan—"The Madman of Naranam"—is a figure of folklore in the Indian province of Kerala. He was apparently an eccentric man, yet he seems to have been fairly respected amongst the people of Kerala as a wise man. On first sight, the story of one of his habits plays out very similarly to that of Sisyphos.
The difference between the two myths is actually two-fold. Of course, Naranath Bhranthan actually chooses to roll the stone up a hill and seems to enjoy (at least) the result of his endeavor (seeing as it is described as a "pastime") as opposed to Sisyphus who seems to have no other choice. The other difference is what is made of the two different performances: Sisyphos is merely made an example of by the gods, seemingly so that others won't dare to defy the gods as he tried to do. Not even

He is, *as much through his passions as through his torture. His scorn of the gods, his hatred of death, and his passion for life won him that unspeakable penalty in which the whole being is exerted toward accomplishing nothing. This is the price that must be paid for the passions of this earth.*

Camus, p. 76

At that subtle moment when man glances backward over his life, Sisyphus returning toward his rock, in that slight pivoting he contemplates that series of unrelated actions which becomes his fate, created by him, combined under his memory's eye and soon sealed by his death.

Camus, p. 78

Naranath Bhranthan's most favorite pastime was rolling a big stone to the top of a nearby hill. The stone was so big and the hill so steep that when he pushed the stone one foot up, it would come two feet down again. But he did not relent - he would try over and over. Sometimes he would also roll down along with the stone, the stone rolling over him. But he'd continue his efforts without showing any pain. After several hours, by the end of the day, he would eventually succeed in his task and take the stone to the top of the hill.

People would be watching curiously at what he was going to do with the big stone at the top of the hill. To the surprise of all, without waiting for a moment to enjoy the fruit of his hard labor, he would kick down the stone and start laughing loudly, clapping his hands.

Uncredited

the interpretation of his actions is up to him. The fact that Naranath Bhranthan is rolling the stone up the hill of his own volition opens his performance up to interpretation by his audience, the people of the nearby village, becoming a deliberate act of expression, potentially even social commentary.

This again is an example for *homo faber* not defined by his or her actions but by setting the terms of their own fate, being his or her *own* maker.

Craftsmanship

In Hannah Arendt's portrayal, *homo faber* uses his or her work to imprint a lasting influence on the world around him or her. *Homo faber* makes the whole world their tool and workshop at the same time. This characterization might feel different from the almost romantic portrayal of Sisyphos and Naranath Bhranthan in the chapter before, yet the motivation to all of these characters is the same in a way: To be the master of their circumstances and have power over their own destiny. While this transformation was directed inward before, leading to a new view of their situation, it is now directed outward, explicitly altering *homo faber*'s surroundings.
Yet, it would be misleading to think of this alteration as happening for its own sake. The motivation of *homo faber* still stays grounded in the desire to better the world and make it more useful to him or her. This is reminiscent of the meaning of the greek word for craftsman, *demioergos*, connecting *demios*, the public, and *ergon*, work [see Sennett, p. 22].

Homo faber is positioned as the counterpart of *animal laborans* in the process of production. We are now looking at a motive familiar from the chapter *Labor*, but from the other perspective: While *animal laborans* is instumentalized by the machines as a supplement to their prowess, *homo faber* has a distinct vision of the world and how it should be. In order to accomplish their vision, they make the rest of their surroundings serve their need, instrumentalizing foremost the machine and, by extension, *animal laborans*.

The animal laborans*, which with its body and the help of tame animals nourishes life, may be the lord and master of all living creatures, but he still remains the servant of nature and the earth; only* homo faber *conducts himself as lord and master of the whole earth.*

Arendt, p. 139

Man, in so far as he is homo faber*, instrumentalizes and his instrumentalization implies a degradation of all things into means, their loss of intrinsic and independent value, so that eventually not only the objects of fabrication but also "the earth in general and all forces of nature," which clearly came into being without the help of man and have an existence independent of the human world, lose their "value because [they] do not present the reification which comes from work."*

Arendt, p. 156 (citing Marx, *Das Kapital,* p. 698)

Richard Sennett on the other hand develops a different view of the motives of craftspeople: The desire to improve on the circumstances the craftsperson finds him- or herself in doesn't have to determine his or her course of action from the beginning; it can also arise during the working process in a back-and-forth dialogue with the piece or the material. This situation often occurs when difficulties and complications emerge in an otherwise predefined process. Such difficulties thwart attempts to adhere to a blueprint or plan and instead necessitate thinking about the very essence of one's work.

For Sennett, a craftsperson thus is less of a zealot and more of a curious soul, eager to examine the processes in their professional life. The aforementioned complications can aid this undertaking—an effective method is therefore to provoke these edge-cases and impose artificial difficulty onto one's project. At this point, the craftsperson very much resembles the artist in his or her approach. While their respective products still reside in their own spheres of context, both of their styles of working are based in an autonomous way of approaching their goal.

In order to go their own path, the one performing the craft has to accept a certain degree of failure and practice. It is however not the failures themselves that define the craftsperson for Ruskin, but how those failures further influence their work. The failure is an opportunity for the craftsperson to reevaluate their work and either learn to improve or recognize a different outcome as desirable. This evaluation comes naturally to *homo faber.*

The craftsman […] represents in each of us the desire to do something well, concretely, for its own sake.

Sennett, p. 144

In the production process, introducing complexity is a procedure that addresses the suspicion that things are not that they seem; here, making things more complex is a technique of investigation.

Sennett, p. 225

You can teach a man to draw a straight line; to strike a curved line and to carve it […] with admirable speed and precision […]: but if you ask him to think about any of those forms, to consider if he cannot find any better in his own head he stops; his execution becomes hesitating; he thinks and ten to one he thinks wrong; ten to one he makes a mistake in the first touch he gives to his work as a thinking being. But you have made a man of him for all that, he was only a machine before, an animated tool.

Ruskin

The Role of Inequality

The previous chapters suggest that the prevalence of either aspect, *animal laborans* or *homo faber*, depends highly on the opportunity to claim agency when it comes to the own way of living. As mentioned in the chapter *Craftsmanship*, a driving factor in the emergence of such opportunities is the experimentation that occurs if things don't go as planned. This in turn requires a position of relative security to be perceived as a chance and not a hindrance or even an existential threat. That said, it isn't far-fetched to associate the considerations on *animal laborans* and *homo faber* with the discussion on economical inequality. The most influential work on this issue in the recent years is probably Thomas Piketty's *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* published in 2013. In the book, Piketty locates two primary sources for the unequal distribution of wealth based on data from the USA, Japan, Germany, France and the United Kingdom: On the one hand, high compensation for top managers that does not necessarily correspond with their productivity (which is also hard to quantify) plays a role in this. The more important factor however is the disparity between the rate of return on capital (e.g. dividends, profits, interest, rents) and the economic growth of a community which is reflected in the average income and economic output (i.e. productivity).

Thus, as long as this imbalance persists (noted by Piketty as $r > g$), wealth concentrates even more in social classes that already own capital whereas the accumulation of wealth through wages alone is impeded. Therefore, someone whose primary concern it is to make ends meet is more likely to remain in that position. This is reminiscent of the charac-

When the rate of return on capital significantly exceeds the growth rate of the economy (as it did through much of history until the nineteenth century and as is likely to be the case again in the twenty-first century), then it logically follows that inherited wealth grows faster than output and income. People with inherited wealth need save only a portion of their income from capital to see that capital grow more quickly than the economy as a whole.

Piketty, Part Three, Chapter 10

Thus throughout most of human history, the inescapable fact is that the rate of return on capital was always at least 10 to 20 times greater than the rate of growth of output (and income). Indeed, this fact is to a large extent the very foundation of society itself: it is what allowed a class of owners to devote themselves to something other than their own subsistence.

Piketty, Ibid.

terization of labor in Hannah Arendt's work—the important difference being that in Arendt's work, it is not at the center of the discussion whether *animal laborans* has a choice to engage in the activities attributed to *homo faber*. Piketty's data suggests that the $r > g$ inequality has been accurate for most of the time since the year 0 A.D. (on a global scale, extrapolated from national data) up until the two world wars in the 20th century. This was mostly due to the constant return on owned land in agrarian societies. The destruction of capital during the two world wars, the introduction of progressive tax policies (i.e. taxes that increase with the taxable amount) and the following economic recovery propelled the economic growth beyond the rate of return on capital for the first time in recent human history and was accompanied by greater economic equality within societies. Since the beginning of the new millennium, economic growth decreases again, particularly in relation to the rate of return on capital.

The question is thus how we as a society, facing such a fundamental inequality, should react. At stake is not only the financial security of many people but also—and maybe more importantly—the dignity in not being reduced to a pawn in the hands of greater powers, be it the gods as it is with Sisyphos or the diffuse forces of the economy.

The Piece

The piece *Animal Laborans, Homo Faber or The Shattering and Reconstruction of a Rock* is a sculpture cast in concrete in the shape of a rock. The mould for the cast was made from the print of a limestone-rock which was subsequently crushed into fine pieces. These pieces were then mixed with cement and poured into the negative form. The production of the piece is thus separated into two steps counteracting each other: Breaking down stone, homogenizing its structure, and casting the stone back in its old form. The two steps appear to cancel each other out and yet leave the rock transformed by the work invested in it. Furthermore, both of the steps can be interpreted before both of the backdrops of *animal laborans* and *homo faber*.

The stone being crushed to pieces viewed with *animal laborans* in mind evokes the hard manual labor performed in quarries. The work being very physically demanding as well as enormously dull, it was formerly often performed by prisoners or captives as a part of their punishment. The product being so devoid of craftsmanship, one can't even pride oneself on accomplishing the feat. In general, when breaking down stone the laborer actually doing it is usually far removed from the end of the work itself, not doing it because gravel is what they need but more often to be paid a wage.

The casting of the stone however is a creative act in the sense of the word. It (re-)creates something where there was nothing before. This is an important mark of *homo faber*, creating an artificial world for him- or

herself. Furthermore, the production process of the work itself can be seen as an examination of the materials themselves—a self-imposed difficulty as discussed in the chapter *Craftsmanship* realized in the dis- and reassembly of the rock. Concrete as the material used further conveys a sense of permanence—a lasting mark being produced and brought into being, just as demanded in the characterization of Arendt's *homo faber*.

Seeing the rock as a burden akin to the stone of Sisyphos however inverts those interpretations: Like this, breaking the stone asunder is an act of freeing oneself of its shackles. Were Sisyphos to destroy his rock he would be free to decide over his own fate again, breaking out of an eternity of fruitless work. This seizing of an opportunity and rejection of his imposed punishment puts him in the realm of *homo faber* again.

The rebuilding of the stone can thus also be framed in a different manner: The stone is cast into the form of its own self, therefore the product of the process is again inserting itself into nature. Viewed like that, the act of production instead becomes an act of consumption. Feeding the fruits of one's labor back into nature mirrors metabolism, a blueprint for the actions of *animal laborans*.

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