IS THERE AN EDUCATIONAL PROBLEM WITH READING HANNAH ARENDT'S *THE HUMAN CONDITION* IN ENGLISH ONLY?

An examination of how certain aspects of education in the English-speaking world tend to make it difficult to gain access to ideas in self-translated texts

by

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Abstract

The author makes the argument that Hannah Arendt's frequently awkward use of English adversely affects the readability of her work. Based primarily on examples selected from Arendt's *The Human Condition*, the analysis shows how the low readability of a text prevents discourse about its message.

At issue in this thesis is the fact that, although most of the philosophy texts in higher education were translated from other languages, they are usually assigned for reading without first making students aware of the impact that translation can have on coherence. The issue is relevant to this thesis because *The Human Condition* is the product of reverse-mental-self-translation from Arendt's inner German. English was not her mother tongue, yet she published in English without allowing her text to be subjected to other than technical editing, resulting in many incoherent passages and the relative inaccessibility of her core ideas. Because such incoherence, when authored by a prominent figure, is often naively accepted by monolingual scholars as *stylistic eccentricity or semantic innovation*, it is referred to, herein, as the 'translation-induced lionization of text,' or TILT.

More specifically, the thesis is a semantic critique of Arendt's translation of the German gerunds *Arbeiten, Herstellen,* and *Handeln* (equivalent to the Greek words *ponein, poiesis* and *praxis*) into the English nouns 'labour,' 'work,' and 'action.' This triad is ill-conceived; they might, more usefully, have been translated as 'toiling,' 'making,' and 'acting.' In particular, by mistranslating *Herstellen* as 'work' instead of 'making,' Arendt makes it impossible, on the first page of the book already, for the reader to engage in the kind of debate that is so ably informed by *Vita activa*, the German translation of her book.

As a possible solution to what he perceives to be a major educational problem, the author proposes that students be trained (and required to engage) in *slow-reading*, a special approach to the reading of challenging texts. In addition, the author laments the demise of respect for, and appreciation of, polyglotism, once a highly valued skill directly relevant to studying and understanding the human condition.
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§ The **Old English** font draws attention to three textual components that have deliberately been given esoteric names: The thesis is bracketed by a *pro-* and a *postlegomenon*, two mini essays that do not, directly, either open or close my argument, yet are indispensable to it – somewhat in the sense of bookends. Similarly, the *epistolary* is an old-fashioned structure that, although it doesn’t have an organically-driven place in the structure of the thesis, provides an indispensable vehicle for Hannah Arendt’s authentic voice.
prolegomenon: Emergence of the unreadable Arendt

pro-le-gom-e-non *

noun (pl. prolegomena)
1: a preliminary discussion; introductory essay, as prefatory matter in a book; a prologue.
2: a treatise serving as a preface or introduction to a book.

* [Greek, from neuter present passive participle of prolegein, to say beforehand: pro-, before; + legein, to speak.] Definition modified from: Dictionary.com Unabridged (v 1.0.1); Based on the Random House Unabridged Dictionary, © Random House.

...a speculative scenario...

It is early morning and Hannah Arendt's New York apartment is cool and quiet. The Jewish German-American philosopher sits in front of her Royal typewriter and lets her unfocused eyes gaze, through a haze of cigarette smoke, into the middle distance. She is about to start writing a book on the conditions of public life that predispose to political freedom and eudaemonia, a Greek concept that can be read as referring to a good and worthwhile life. Having studied the ancient Greeks with Martin Heidegger, she wants, among other things, to incorporate the lessons learned from Plato and Aristotle when they distinguished between ponein (toiling), poiesis (making), and praxis (acting). Arendt wishes to demonstrate how praxis (what humans, as zoon politikon, do when they expose themselves to scrutiny by acting in public) is more important than poiesis (what humans, as homo faber, do by making

1 Heidegger was Arendt's philosophy professor (and briefly her lover), whose ideas on 'being' culminated in his 1927 magnum opus Being and Time, a book that revolutionized philosophy.
things and thus fabricating an artificial world) or ponein (what humans, as animal laborans, must do in order to stay alive). Her objective is to remind us that making a living and making things, while important, should not consume all of our efforts - we must also value both praxis, the willingness to act in public, and phronesis, the wisdom that supports and fosters praxis.

From her own experience, Arendt knows that for human beings to act in public is accompanied by risks; but she also knows about 'the origins of totalitarianism,' that affliction of the human condition she described in an earlier book of that name, and is aware that public debate and action are the best defence against the kind of totalitarian forces that had ravaged her beloved homeland and, in the guise of anti-communist zeal, had, for nearly a decade, also been strangling human rights in her adopted home, the United States of America.

On this morning, sitting at her typewriter, her thoughts are on the activities that define and delimit human life. Her agile mind races as she feels, thinks, formulates, reflects, rephrases, and finally formalizes, in elegant German, her thoughts about what humans beings do in order to be in the world. These are clearly reflected in the German title she has provisionally selected: "Vita activa - oder vom tätigen Leben."³

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² As Arendt is writing this, the McCarthyist anti-communist frenzies in the U.S. are just starting to abate.
³ Vita activa: concerning the life of activity
But her first paragraph already presents a problem: the words that spring rapidly with a passionate intensity into her mind are rooted not in English but in German; and she must produce an English text. Arendt has no problem with this; as an American, she is determined not to be a writer whose works have to be translated from German. In fact, the book will be her second major English production as an American thinker, following her 1951 publication of *The Origins of Totalitarianism*.

Though desiring to write in English, she is vexed by the problem of rendering her complex German ideas in English, a language whose subtleties she hasn’t completely mastered. She now realizes that the earlier *Origins* was much simpler to write – it was more political, and did not involve the subtle philosophical distinctions she must now make in English.

She struggles on with the manuscript, mentally translating each phrase out of the tumultuous and exquisite German in her head. But the words come very slowly – her extremely long, fast trains of thought are constantly derailing, as endless torrents of her German ideas repeatedly wash out the spongy bed of her much weaker English ... even the cigarettes don't help.⁴ She begins several times – but to no avail: the instant she tries to capture her quick and expressive German in English, her sentences become sluggish and murky. Arendt is now frustrated and angry.

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⁴ Arendt, a heavy smoker, is credited with the comment that “smoking helps with the thought process.” [http://washtimes.com/entertainment/20050518-093640-4038r.htm](http://washtimes.com/entertainment/20050518-093640-4038r.htm)
Unfortunately, she has also decided not to resort to a tactic she deployed successfully with *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. For the earlier book she actually wrote large parts of the draft in German and then translated them into English. While this would be an obvious solution, since she will be asked to publish a German translation anyway, time will not permit this option. She consoles herself by reflecting on the fact that her English has improved much over recent years, due to voluminous reading, frequent lecturing, and many philosophical discussions with Mary McCarthy and others – and she presses on.

The very first sentence presents Arendt with a terminological problem. She is unsure as to how she should translate three German gerunds: *Arbeiten*, *Herstellen*, and *Handeln*. Ultimately, and regrettably, she decides to translate these as three nouns, 'labour,' 'work' and 'action,' and proceeds to write:

> With the term *vita activa*, I propose to designate three fundamental activities: labor, work, and action.

As she writes, she cannot escape a niggling worry: is her meaning clear enough? She remembers the admonishments of Mary McCarthy, a masterful user of the English language, and toys with the idea of asking her for help: Rose Feitelson, one of her

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5 working, toiling, or labouring  
6 making, fabricating, or producing  
7 doing, dealing, or acting  
8 This decision is to have seriously negative consequences, both for the readability of her text and, concomitantly, for the wider dissemination of her ideas.  
9 Mary McCarthy was Arendt’s closest female friend and confidante, with whom she carried on a lengthy and personal correspondence. This correspondence was published in *Between Friends*:
"Englishers,"\(^{10}\) might also be helpful. But she quickly discards the idea - neither one understands German and neither would, therefore, be able to help her find precisely the right English words or phrases for her subtle philosophical ideas.

As Arendt presses ahead, she unwittingly allows her otherwise good\(^{11}\) grasp of English to be quickly pushed to and past its limits - incoherent sentences and semantic errors accumulate. Oblivious to the conventional specificity of certain English terms and expressions, and unwilling to listen to those that have warned her about this weakness in her writing, Arendt commits one error after another. Though she strives to capture the elegance of her German thoughts, awkward statements and incorrect word choices begin to colonize the translation, seriously impairing the ability of the reader to understand what she is talking about.

When *The Human Condition* finally hits the North American market it is applauded - in academic circles. But, ironically, in spite of its being read by what is usually a critical readership, the book's linguistic shortcomings get little if any attention. That same year, Arendt is pressed by Piper, her German publisher, for a German version. As Arendt cannot face translating the laboriously completed work, she asks her journalist friend, Charlotte Beradt (now a New York hairdresser), to do a rough

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\(^{10}\) Rose Feitelson was one of her “Englishers” (Arendt’s term) – “our closest friend ... (who) ... arranges my English.” [http://hannaharendt.net/documents/feitelson_1.html](http://hannaharendt.net/documents/feitelson_1.html)

\(^{11}\) Arendt learned English rather late in life. She came to the US in 1941 at the age of 35, and only then started to learn English, her sixth language, after German, French, Latin, Greek, and Hebrew.
translation of the work - she would polish it later. Two years later, Arendt publishes *Vita activa - oder vom tätigen Leben*. Interestingly, Charlotte Beradt is nowhere (in the book) given credit for her contribution as initial translator. There is also a startling difference between the two books: The language of *Vita activa* is powerful and clear, with a persuasive, fluid coherence that is totally missing in *The Human Condition*.

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To my knowledge, few writers have compared the German with the English version of *The Human Condition*. Roy Tsao (2002) did so in a limited way, but he refrained from dealing with her linguistic errors, preferring to dwell on her interpretation of ancient Greek ideas of the *polis*. Had someone looked at coherence, or any measure of linguistic quality, then Arendt’s lack of competence in English words would immediately have made itself known, and two questions might have been asked: “What is the novice reader of *The Human Condition* actually getting out of the effort?” and, following therefrom, “Should students be expected to deal with such poor quality translations without, at least, having their attention drawn to the nature and vagaries of translation?” These two questions helped me to zero in on my overall research question: “Is there an educational problem with reading philosophy in translation?”

The short answers to these three questions, respectively, are “Very little!,” “No!,” and “Definitely!” My thesis is the longer answer.
Introduction

This thesis came into being, in part, due to my frustration at the confusing and awkward English with which the political theorist and philosopher, Hannah Arendt, too often introduces important ideas in the critical opening passages of her book, *The Human Condition*. Initially limited to sheer anger at her careless use of language, my concern evolved to encompass, in the main, three issues: 1) how did it come about that Arendt’s English in *The Human Condition* is often so inaccessible?, 2) why did Arendt’s linguistic problems (with English) never become a topic of academic criticism?, and 3) given the above, what aspects of education in the English-speaking world make it difficult for students to gain access to Arendt’s ideas? This introduction is a somewhat linear exposition of the questions that arose in my mind as I attempted to read Hannah Arendt’s works.

The problem started when I opened the book.

On the very first page, I was confronted with the following: “The human condition of labor is life itself.” This statement illustrates a kind of opacity that I have difficulty accepting, even if the author is supposedly a renowned thinker. Incensed at, and then puzzled by, Arendt’s use of language, I decided to investigate this phenomenon more closely. I found out, for a start, that while she first wrote *The Human Condition* in English she subsequently also published the

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12 While I am addressing issues that pertain to all English-speaking countries, my own experience is based on having been trained as an elementary school teacher in Canada and having taught at the post-secondary level both internationally and in Canada since 1976.
German *Vita activa*, a sentence-for-sentence translation of the original. It seemed that a way forward had presented itself.

Being fluent in both English and German, I was able to examine her ideas in both languages. I soon realized, to my amazement, that what Arendt said in bad English frequently did not agree, in substance or essence, with what she said in excellent German – in spite of the fact that, to all intents and purposes, a near sentence-by-sentence correspondence exists between these two books. Curiosity became obsession, and I acquired the English and German versions of many of her published works. By comparing selected passages, i.e., those that were most impenetrable in English, in those texts that Arendt herself wrote in both languages, and without presuming to know what she intended to say, I had no difficulty deciding that the German version was invariably the better of the two. I concluded that something had gone wrong in her creation of English text.

As indicated above, the principal works I wrestled with for this thesis were *The Human Condition* (Arendt, 1958c) and its translation, *Vita activa* (Arendt, 1960). But I was reluctant to draw conclusions based on only one of her texts, so I also examined, in some detail, several of her other books. The most important of these, for my argument, were *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (Arendt, 1951) and

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13 I was 7 when my family emigrated from Germany in 1952. As a chubby ‘Nazi’ immigrant whose father also happened to be ‘the Teacher’ and who moved away every year, I did not make friends easily. Luckily for me, an illness that kept me in bed for several months led to my reading books at the age of 5. Thus I resorted to reading as my main source of entertainment. I had access to many German books (mostly adult) and was allowed to read extensively. In later years, I was to lose some facility with German due to lack of use, but this decline was reversed when, as an adult, I began to spend increasing amounts of time in Germany.
The Life of the Mind – Volume One (Arendt, 1977), which I read together with their translations: respectively, Elemente und Ursprünge totaler Herrschaft (Arendt, 1955a) and Vom Leben des Geistes – Band 1 (Arendt, 1979).

Right away, I found it noteworthy that I had no real problem with Arendt’s English in Origins, in spite of the fact that it had been written earlier than The Human Condition. Although awkward in places, the book was surprisingly readable. Nonetheless, her relative discomfort with English can be seen in the opening sentences of Chapter 5:

The three decades from 1884 to 1914 separate the nineteenth century, which ended with the scramble for Africa and the birth of the pan-movements, from the twentieth, which began with the First World War. This is the period of Imperialism, with its stagnant quiet in Europe and breath-taking developments in Asia and Africa. Some of the fundamental aspects of this time appear so close to totalitarian phenomena of the twentieth century that it may be justifiable to consider the whole period a preparatory stage for coming catastrophes. (Arendt, 1951, p. 123)

While it isn’t incorrect, the above formulation is a rather impoverished version of what she offers her German readers:

The following, more or less literal, translation reveals the subtle descriptions and clarifications (underscored passages) that Arendt’s original English version fails to provide.

The Age of Imperialism, as the three decades 1884 to 1914 are usually referred to, separates the nineteenth century, that ended with the ‘scramble for Africa’ and the birth of the pan-movements, from the twentieth, that began with World War I. Characteristic of this time is the breathtaking rapidity with which events and developments in Africa and Asia unfolded, and the peculiarly sinister, stagnating calm that lay over Europe during this time, and which was in retrospect recognizable, only after the sudden catastrophe of 1914, as the calm before the storm. (translation by GB; underscoring added)

In the original, Arendt fails to indicate that ‘the scramble for Africa’ is not her formulation, but rather a term used frequently in alluding to this period in history. In her German version she correctly identifies the English term as special, by italicizing it and placing it in quotation marks. She should have placed it within inverted commas in the English as well. Without this, the term appears to be passed off as original and therefore not nearly as rich in meaning.

The “breathtaking rapidity...[of developments]” is NOT the same thing as “breathtaking developments.” Referring to global upheavals that occurred during this 30-year period, it is strange that Arendt would omit the reference to the speed of these changes. Similarly, the “peculiarly sinister, stagnating calm that lay over Europe” tells the reader a lot about the ambient social atmosphere in Europe during the Age of Imperialism; whereas a “stagnant quiet in Europe” is not only pathetic as a descriptive phrase, but it gives the reader little, if any, insight. The use of ‘quiet’ in place of ‘calm’ reveals a lack of familiarity with socio-historical terminology. Arendt obviously had this picture in her mind, but in English she
was unable to communicate it. The consequence of this differential in familiarity with colloquialisms was the creation of two very different texts.

This difference, in my opinion, is such as to make me want to read the German and throw away the English version of *Origins*. Of course, English-only readers don’t have that opportunity, they must accept her English and try to do the best they can with it. It must be said, however, that *Origins* is still much easier to read than *The Human Condition*. I attribute this to the nature of the material covered. The former is a broad-brush treatise concerning political events and ideologies, whereas in the latter she has to grapple with extremely subtle distinctions of human activity – ideas that she finds much easier to express in German. It is here that the problem arises: The impact of her style on the readability of *The Human Condition* has serious educational consequences – culminating in the penetration of her ideas into the social consciousness of those who might have benefited from her thoughts on ‘the human condition’ had they been able to read and understand the book.

*The Life of the Mind* also presents difficulties, although this time in the opposite direction. There is now the special circumstance of having to deal with existential and phenomenological concepts. These are so obscure that neither the German nor the English text make easy reading. By their very nature, such ideas often appear incoherent, simply because they are indescribable. As a result of Arendt’s being less terse than in *The Human Condition*, the English and German versions of ‘the life of the mind’ are, more or less, equally difficult.
The difference in wordiness between *The Human Condition* and *The Life of the Mind* is quasi-measurable. The first paragraph of *The Life of the Mind* has a word count of about 180 (in English) and just under 200 (in German) – a common relationship between English and German wording. However, the third paragraph in *The Human Condition*, in which she introduces a term (‘work’) that is central to her argument, has 67 words in English, while there are twice as many (135) words in the German translation. The relative terseness of the English version may be attributed to Arendt’s habit of severe, and often unwarranted, parsimony with words when writing in English. Why she was sometimes so semantically frugal is unknown. But that she was alerted to it by her friend, Mary McCarthy, is a matter of record (Brightman, 1995; p. 296).

My investigations then focused on problematic passages in *The Human Condition*, as identified by comparison with their German equivalents in *Vita activa*. I soon discovered that where her English defied interpretation, her German did not. This led me to ask: What if, due to this phenomenon, English-only students were being prevented from gaining access to Arendt’s ideas? Without being warned that the quality of her English is suspect, students are expected to deal with material that just doesn’t make sense. I was disturbed by this, seeing it initially as academic neglect. I now realize that many English-speaking scholars are simply unaware that much of *The Human Condition* was written in poor English. When perceived, awkward wording is attributed to *stylistic eccentricity* or *semantic innovation*. These scholars are probably not
aware of the correspondence between Arendt and McCarthy (Brightman, 1995), which alludes to Arendt’s struggle with the English language. That having been said, the facile acceptance of poor English is not conducive to the teaching of philosophical ideas, and the practice of assigning such readings without discussing the quality of the language ought to be reviewed.

Another question might also be asked: How could this problem have escaped attention all this time – i.e., since 1958? The answer is not difficult to find. At North American universities, the problem seems to occur when, due in part to the decline of academic polyglotism, students are routinely unable to read an author’s mother tongue, and are thus unable to vet the translations they are expected to accept as valid. The only option with regard to The Human Condition was for monolingual readers to accept Arendt’s obscure wording as given – on the assumption that, being a famous thinker, she knew what she was saying, and that any baffling linguistic constructions were merely evidence that the ideas must be beyond the reader’s capacity to comprehend. This is not an acceptable situation.

Of course, the problem is not solely due to Arendt’s obduracy. It was also sheer bad luck that the quality of Arendt’s English was, at the same time, too good and yet not good enough: It was too good to make it obvious to her publisher that her texts should either have been edited more carefully, or translated from German by a native English speaker; yet not quite good enough to yield a readable English text based solely on her own efforts.
Core Concepts

Even the best translation cannot be expected to make philosophical texts easy to read – translation should, however, always yield text that is potentially at least as understandable as the original. When incoherence is the result of inadequate translation, philosophical ideas are made inaccessible to scrutiny, reflection, and debate. This violates the very purpose of reading or teaching philosophy. In fact, it is not overstating the matter to say that when translation leads to an inability to engage with important ideas, this can have significant negative societal sequelae.

To provide a conceptual context for the following discussion, I now introduce three interrelated topics: the practice of translation, a discourse on eudaemonia, and the matter of readability.
Translation

“Tradditore, traditore!”
(Translator, traitor!)

This Italian saying implies that the translator’s loyalty to the text cannot be assumed, and that, consequently, translations cannot be trusted to convey the exact equivalence\textsuperscript{14} of the original. The aphorism is therefore a reminder that translation cannot be expected to yield correct or complete equivalence. Realizing the error-prone nature of translation would go a long way toward avoiding the naïve complacency with which many, if not most, readers tend to accept a translation as somehow being a valid version of the original. The point that needs to be made even more urgently, however, is that translations ought never to be assigned as reading for students without instructors making it clear, especially in philosophy, that translations can be treacherous: 	extit{caveat lector!}

Sadly, it appears that, even in academe, where the need for caution should be most highly appreciated, translations tend to be accepted too readily as equivalent to the original texts. This error ought to be recognized, in other than just departments of linguistics and translation theory, as the source of a serious educational problem. It would, in fact, be more useful to consider translation as \textit{a modest attempt to create in the target language a tentative approximation of a text that exists in the source language}. While such extreme qualification reveals a pessimistic view of translation, there seems to be little reason for optimism.

\textsuperscript{14} What ‘exact equivalence’ means in this context is not important.
Difficulties in inter-cultural communication will not likely be ameliorated by translation. And educational systems that systematically ignore the errors introduced by poor translation are supporting the growth of ignorance and misunderstanding – commodities that, in present times, are already in oversupply.

How important is translation in inter-cultural communication? Robin D. Gill’s excellent book on the haiku, *Orientalism and Occidentalism: Is the Mistranslation of Culture Inevitable?* (Gill, 2003), provides solid evidence that translation is for the most part doomed to be unsuccessful, especially when it comes to those things that are subtle, yet critical to fully understanding another culture. His clever and highly entertaining analyses make it clear that translation is an extremely difficult task and one that ought not to be done without training.

The difficulty of communicating between different cultures and languages is made more evident when we consider that, even within a given culture, communication is fraught with hazards. Osmo Wiio (1978), a Finnish expert on communication and readability, goes so far as to assert that “all human communication fails, except by accident” (p. 1). Having had to deal with Arendt’s limited ability to communicate in English, I realize that *Wiio’s Laws of Communication*¹⁵ are especially relevant to the art of translation.

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The nature of translation

The problem being discussed herein is founded on the desire for an elusive commodity: the translation of ideas that were conceived in another language and/or culture. It is elusive because the very nature of language is mired in the mud of semantic indeterminacy and cultural difference. Although by nature an extremely difficult, if not impossible, task, the bridging of the gulf between two cultures with translation is today a facile substitute for the much more difficult solution: acquiring mastery of the respective languages.

The bilingual reader has an opportunity to sense (still a far cry from the ability to see) the world from the vantage point of the other. The monolingual reader, on the other hand, must rely on translation, which offers only a very tenuous and impoverished substitute for such a mental and cultural shift of place. Unfortunately, due to the relative ease with which it is acquired, a translation is an easy sell to those who wish to have rapid and effortless access to important writings. In everyday matters, of course, a simplistic translation may be a perfectly adequate substitute for the real thing, although the quality of some translated instruction manuals put even this in question. But this is rarely the case with philosophical ideas – these are simply too deeply rooted in the fundamental structures (and weaknesses) of language to yield to simplistic interpretation.

Translation occurs, according to translation theory, from the source language (the one translated out of) to the target language (the one translated into). It is also convention, in translation theory, to refer to the temporal sequence of acquisition,
in the translator’s life, of the two languages involved in the translation. Accordingly, the translator’s best language is (usually) his or her first or native language and is sometimes referred to as the translator’s L1. Languages acquired subsequently are referred to as L2, L3, ... etc. The usage I adhere to is explained by Julia Falla (n.d.).

Translation is also categorized depending on the direction of the translation. Conventionally, translation direction is of the form L2 (source) to L1 (target), for the simple reason that the source text is fully specified (it exists), whereas the target text has yet to be created by the translator from the nearly limitless possibilities offered by the target language. The L2 > L1 direction of conventional translation reflects that the translator will obviously be able to find the appropriate wording (semantics and syntax) more easily in L1 than in L2.

Besides conventional (L2 > L1) translation, there are three special kinds of translation that require discussion: reverse translation, self-translation, and mental or inner translation. It is important to understand the implications of all of these, as Arendt was engaged in all of them: reverse-mental-self-translation.

**Reverse translation**

When, instead of translating from L2 into L1, one translates from L1 into L2, this is referred to as reverse translation.

Professional translators usually translate into their own language, not out of it. All the same, throughout the world, a great deal of reverse

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Translation – that is, translation into a foreign language – is done every day. In the business world many people are expected to translate out of their (own) language. In this case, the aim is to transmit the intended message in a form that is clear and without unintended comic effects.17

But “unintended comic effects” are the hallmark of reverse translation. On the 20th of September, 2006, a BBC news story under the head line “Jerusalem is lost in translation” makes this point very dramatically, and it is impossible to resist the temptation of citing it here. Referring to a sightseeing pamphlet extolling Jerusalem, which was reverse translated by an Israeli into English, the article says, in part:

Tourism officials in Israel did little to sell the city of Jerusalem as a must-see for visitors when a brochure suggested it did not exist.

The sightseeing pamphlet was translated from Hebrew and should have read: “Jerusalem - there’s no city like it!”.

But instead the slogan in English read: “Jerusalem - there’s no such city!”, reported the Israeli newspaper Maariv.

Tens of thousands of the leaflets were distributed before the Jerusalem municipality realised its mistake.18

This is the kind of error that reverse translation frequently engenders, and Arendt’s translations fall into this category.

If the avoidance of “unintended comic effects” is seen as important in commerce and tourism, linguistic distortions that obscure meaning should be seen as being even more important in philosophy. Sadly, this appears not to be the case.

17 http://www.ihes.com/bcn/translation/reverse.html
Indeed, when reverse translation in philosophy results in strange linguistic formulations, it is not uncommon to find such usage met with deference, as though even the most opaque sentence, when delivered by a renowned figure, must somehow contain a profound truth if only the reader were clever enough to discern it. As an example of this, one has only to point to the completely opaque statement on page 1 of The Human Condition: “The human condition of labor is life itself.” This sentence will be mentioned again, in greater detail, below. In addition, the overall phenomenon is described in a subsequent section as the TILT effect, the ‘translation-induced lionization of text’ (see page 102).

Reverse translation is especially error prone when the writer/translator is not skilled in the stylistic usage of L2. If there is a significant difference in skill level between one’s ability in L1 versus that in L2, reverse translation can seriously degrade the quality of the resulting text. Referring to the work of Clyne (1987), translation expert Verena Jung19 (2002) says that

to know a language does not necessarily involve knowing its genre conventions. German students who wrote papers in English tended to write them in a more German, i.e., less linear style, which made these papers less easily readable for native speakers of English. (Jung, 2002, p.18)

She goes on to say that “bilingualism (in an academic context) must be accompanied by an academic background in both cultures in order for an author

to be understood in both cultures” (ibid.). As a European, Arendt should have questioned, at least a little bit, her ability to convey subtle ideas in clear English.

But linguistic problems based on unfamiliarity is only part of the problem. There is also the matter of lacking the normal *intertextuality*\(^{20}\) that is available to the native English speaker. Jung alludes to the concept, saying that a description of knowing what an academic language means...is not just a matter of terminology but also of knowing from extensive reading in that subject the way sentences are normally conceptualized in the specific context in question. Thus the literature in that field is the intertext that is at the disposal of the writer and the readers. Intertext is used here in accordance with Bakhtin’s concept of dialogicity...not in the sense of one particular text that is quoted by the author, but a collective knowledge distilled from a multiplicity of texts read by the authors or even language usage that they have absorbed. (ibid. p. 19)

Arendt did not have at her disposal the necessary intertextuality in the English language. Jung tells us that Arendt herself was aware of this, although there is a surprising twist in this acknowledgement. Following on from the above citation, Jung cites Arendt, saying that “[t]his is illustrated by Arendt when she explains the difference between her English writing in the terms of a missing intertext in English” (p. 19):

> I write in English, but I have never lost the distance (*Distanz*). There is a huge difference between mother tongue and another language. For myself I can say that frightfully (*furchtbar*) simply: In German I know a large portion of German poetry by heart. They move somehow always – ‘in the back of my mind’ (*im Hinterkopf*) ... this is

\(^{20}\) Intertextuality is a much broader term than *influence* (the direct effect, conscious or unconscious, of one author on another); intertextuality is the general condition by which it is possible for a text to be a text: the whole network of relations, conventions, and expectations by which the text is defined. Many modern critics argue that all texts are necessarily related by language and that there is no such thing as an absolute text. (UVic Writer’s Guide - http://web.uvic.ca/wguide/Pages/LTIntertext.html)
naturally never to be achieved again. In German I can get away with things I would never try in English (ibid. pp. 19-20). (GB translation)

Jung makes an interesting observation\(^{21}\) in interpreting Arendt’s comment as suggesting that her use of an English colloquialism within a *German* text indicates that her English has now extended farther than her German:

\[\text{Im Deutschen kenne ich einen ziemlich großen Teil deutscher Gedichte auswendig. Die bewegen sich da immer irgendwo im Hinterkopf – in the back of my mind –; das ist natürlich nie wieder zu erreichen.}\]

Jung feels that Arendt’s mention (in a German text) of the English metaphor “in the back of my mind” indicates a greater comfort with English. But this is not a valid conclusion to draw, since Arendt first uses the German *im Hinterkopf*, which, besides being precisely the appropriate metaphor in German, is perfectly in keeping with the *moving around* analogy in the sentence. The question has to be asked: why did Arendt add the throw-away English phrase? I propose that Arendt was simply displaying her familiarity with English, by waving an English idiom in front of her German interlocutor. There is no useful purpose to be served by saying what she did, other than making the interviewer aware of her comfort with idiomatic English. Jung interprets its presence in the sentence as “illustrat(ing) that Arendt feels capable of writing in her academic discipline of

\[^{21}\text{The actual reference for the citation is missing in Jung’s text. She indicates a reference (Arendt 1976: 22) but fails to include this source in the bibliography.}\]
political philosophy in both English and German, while she lacks the collective intertext of poetry most English academics share, ..."(ibid.). I agree with Jung’s conclusion only to the extent that Arendt may have felt competent; Jung’s conclusion that the statement indicates the existence of “a new intertext of language use that she [Arendt] would not have at her disposal in German” is difficult to justify.

Arendt herself admitted that “[t]here is a huge difference between mother tongue and another language... [i]n German I can get away with things I would never try in English.” This statement is far more telling. Unfortunately for her readers, Arendt nevertheless tried to “get away with” far too much in her English writings.

Another enlightening discussion about reverse translation from German was recorded in a series of Internet chat-room messages by John Collier, related to Leica product reports, one of which I quote here:

...Unfortunately (Erwin P’s) English language usage seems to have been learned at the knee of a German ad copy writer. Far too flowery praise for things that have been common industry practice for many years and let us not forget that peculiarly Germanic denseness of expression. Simple things expressed in needless confusing complexity. For us native English speakers it raises those same alarm bells that ring so loudly when snake oil salesman appear at our doors. It really is a pity as I know it is not the intended effect. English is Erwin’s fourth or fifth language and he is very good considering that I struggle unsuccessfully with one. You just have to remind yourself, when reading his prose, that he does not mean it to sound that way. (underscoring added)

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22 http://mejac2.palo-alto.ca.us/leica-users/v22/msg00402.html
23 German 35mm camera
This comment about Erwin P’s English offers a useful explanation of the shortcomings of Arendt’s overly-Germanic English. It is worth stressing that the initial errors and distortions due to reverse translation survive into the final text solely because Arendt, as her own translator and editor, was unable to detect subtle flaws in English that would have been immediately obvious to a native speaker. The problem derives from the fact that she engaged in self-translation — a hazardous enterprise for someone not fully fluent in L2.

A somewhat different situation occurs when some translators (myself included) end up being more competent in L2 than in L1, as is sometimes the case with emigré writers who have been away from their native countries and languages for a long time. In my own case I started to translate from German to English (L1 to L2) while I was working for the B.C. Ministry of Health — we were receiving German articles on case-based medical costing and I was the only one around who could deal with German. It was fairly easy and turned out to be a fun experience. One thing led to another and I was soon asked (by a Deputy Minister who had an interest in German hospital procedures) to render German healthcare news reports into English.

Subsequently, I turned my hand to translating poetry, largely because I love writing and reading poetry, but also because I was very unhappy with some extant translations. For instance, I spent months improving on certain translations of Rainer Maria Rilke (1875-1926) and Friedrich Hölderlin (1770-1843). But my
most successful piece is my translation of Theodor Storm’s *Weihnachtsabend*. I offer here the poem and translation as evidence of my status as a translator/traitor:

**Weihnachtsabend**
by Theodor Storm

Die fremde Stadt durchschnitt ich sorgenvoll,
Der Kinder denkend, die ich ließ zu Haus.
Weihnachten war’s: durch alle Gassen scholl
Der Kinderjubel und des Markts Gebraus.

Und wie der Menschenstrom mich fortgespielt,
Drang mir ein heiser Stimmlein in das Ohr:
»Kauft, lieber Herr!« Ein magres Handchen hielt
Feilbietend mir ein ärmlisch Spielzeug vor.

Ich schrak empor, und beim Laternenschein
Sah ich ein bleiches Kinderangesicht;
Wes Alters und Geschlechts es mochte sein,
Erkannt ich im Vorübertreiben nicht.

Nur von dem Treppenstein, darauf es saß,
Noch immer hört ich, mühsam, wie es schien:
»Kauft, lieber Herr!« den Ruf ohn Unterlass;
Doch hat wohl keiner ihm Gehör verliehn.

Und ich? - War’s Ungeschick, war es die Scham,
Am Weg zu handeln mit dem Bettelkind?
Eh meine Hand zu meiner Börse kam,
Verscholl das Stimmlein hinter mir im Wind.

Doch als ich endlich war mit mir allein,
Erfaßte mich die Angst im Herzen so,
Als saß mein eigen Kind auf jenem Stein
Und schrie nach Brot, indessen ich entfloh.

**Christmas Eve**
by Theodor Storm (transl. G. Brauer)

Forlorn, I walked the foreign city’s streets,
Thinking of home, and of my little boys.
Christmas it was: and all the lanes rang sweet
With joyous children and the market’s noise.

And as the festive mob bore me along
A hoarse wee voice came sudden to my ear:
»Please, Sir, buy this!« and then a small, thin hand
Held up for sale a shabby toy held dear.

As I was jostled from my thoughts, I saw.
Dim lit a child’s pale face ere I swept past;
How old it might have been, if boy or girl,
I couldn’t tell, for I was walking fast.

Then, from the cold stone steps on which it sat,
My ear just caught the small voice, straining, plead
»Please, Sir, buy this!« repeated without pause;
Yet no one in the throng, it seemed, paid heed.

And I? ... Was it too awkward there to stop
And buy from that poor child? Was I too proud?
Whatever ’twas, ’fore I could grab my purse,
The little voice was lost among the crowd.

But then, when I was once again alone,
My heart out of sheer anguish gave a cry,
As if my child had sat there, on that stone,
Pleading for bread, and I, in haste, rushed by.

The direction of translation is obvious, as some of the English phrasing is somewhat stilted. What isn’t obvious is the fact that it was reverse translation by an émigré writer – this only becomes known when the language acquisition history of the translator is revealed. In any case, I was unaware that I shouldn’t be doing it and so I did it. The task I had set myself was to convey the idea and the

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24 http://meister.igl.uni-freiburg.de/gedichte/sto_tl1.html
emotion of the poem, as well as to adhere generally to the form and rhyme scheme. While the iambic pentameter original has the abab scheme, I managed the abab only in the first and last stanzas. The rest were abcb – but it was iambic pentameter and its fierce poignancy was, I believe, fully captured.

An even better illustration of reverse translation by émigré writers is the work of author and translator Harry Zohn (1924-1977) who, while professor of German at Brandeis University, translated Walter Benjamin’s *Illuminations*, which, incidentally, contains an insightful essay called “The Task of the Translator” (Benjamin, 1969). Zohn emigrated to England from Austria in 1939 at the age of 15 – Arendt, on the other hand, came to the US in 1941, aged 35. One year later Zohn moved to the United States where he attended Suffolk University, getting a B.A. in 1946. He went on to receive three more degrees, culminating in a Harvard Ph.D. The very considerable difference between his educational and language acquisition history and that of Hannah Arendt serves to explain why Zohn, unlike Arendt, was qualified to engage in reverse translation and did a remarkable job.

**Self-translation**

There is another kind of translation that happens when authors translate their own texts from one language to another. When the author and the translator are the same person, then we are dealing with auto-,\(^{25}\) authorial,\(^{26}\) or self-translation.

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\(^{25}\) Grutman (1997).

\(^{26}\) Van Hulle (n.d.) [http://www.tei-c.org/Activities/ETE/Preview/vanhulle.xml](http://www.tei-c.org/Activities/ETE/Preview/vanhulle.xml)
That it is not often the subject of critical discussion outside of translation studies, contributes to the seeming paucity (in other than translation studies) of critical debate on the quality of translated texts in general.

Referring to Grutman's (1997) article in the Routledge Encyclopedia on Translation Studies, Jung states that “while academic self-translations are taken more for granted than literary ones, this also means that they have not been studied as extensively as have their literary counterparts” (Jung, 2002; p. 15). The clue lies in what Jung refers to as ‘taken for granted’ – when one interprets this phrase as accepted as written, the problem becomes more clear: Self-translations of academic texts may be spared the critical scrutiny to which translations by a second party are subjected.

Jung goes on to say that

[s]elf-translators are given the role both of translator and of author’s editor in their writing or re-writing. If bilingualism and biculturalism can be principally seen as the interior preconditions necessary to enable an author to work as self-translator, the third necessary precondition could be described as an exterior precondition: Self-translators are given a forum to present their self-translation in, and there they are treated differently from a translator in so far as they are treated as translator and editor in one. (Jung, 2002; p.20)

When authors, by translating their own L2 text back into L1, actually improve the readability and comprehensibility of their text, it may be an important insight into
their relative competence in L2. Verena Jung suggests something similar when she reports Rudolf Arnheim’s feelings on his self-translation:

Rudolf Arnheim’s self-translation of his most influential work *Visual Thinking* into German, is one of the prime examples (of self-translation) ... [in a letter to Jung] Arnheim claimed that, despite the fact that the English version preceded the German version, the German title *Anschauliches Denken* was better able to capture what he had had in mind. (2002; p. 16, underscoring added)

The subtle difference in meaning between Arnheim’s two titles is informative: *anschaulich* means *clear* and *vivid*, and implies the idea of *attractive*, something that *lends itself to being looked at*. Being based on the verb *anschauen* (to gaze at), it also fits with Arnheim’s message as a psychologist of the visual arts. How very different from the one-dimensional word *visual*. English has no word that conveys both *clear*, *attractive*, and *visual*, so *Visual Thinking* was the best they could come up with – an inferior title, anyway you look at it. Similarly, it can be argued that Arendt’s self-translation of *The Human Condition* from her inner German may have contributed to a degraded rendition of her ideas.

Self-translation also represents a unique possibility to investigate the nature and extent of the difference between the two authorial versions of what was written. Uncontaminated by an intermediate conceptualization, the two versions offer the opportunity to ask the more penetrating question: What did the author *really* mean? Without presuming that any text fully, correctly, or adequately conveys what its writer means to communicate, this offers an opportunity to arrive at a more valid meaning of the content.

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27 Arnheim (1969 and 1972) authored his *magnum opus* in English (L2) and subsequently
It is an incontrovertible fact that Arendt’s self-translation of *The Human Condition* back into L1 resulted in a vastly more readable and more understandable text. But the relative clarity of the German remains puzzling, especially given the sentence-by-sentence correspondence between the two documents. How can translation accomplish this? Regrettably, Jung (2002) does not examine Arendt’s self-translation (L2-L1) of *The Human Condition*, choosing instead another book, whose translation is very much in question: the self-translation (ostensibly L2 > L1) of *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951) into *Elemente und Ursprünge totaler Herrschaft* (1955a). For two reasons, this book is a poor choice on Jung’s part. Firstly, in the Foreword to the first edition of the German text, Hannah Arendt herself clearly denies that she translated the work into German, implying instead that she rewrote it, using the English version as inspiration. Secondly, she openly admits (but only to her German readers) that several chapters of the English text were not originally written in English at all, but in German and only subsequently translated into English, making the German version the original expression (not a translation) of her ideas:

*Dies ist die deutsche Fassung des Buches The Origin of Totalitarianism, das im Frühjahr 1951 in Amerika erschien. Es ist keine in jedem Wort getreue Übersetzung des englischen Textes. Einige Kapitel hatte ich selber noch deutsch geschrieben und später ins Englische übersetzt; in diesen Fällen ist hier der Originaltext eingesetzt. Aber auch sonst haben sich bei der Umarbeitung ins deutsche hie und da Änderungen ergeben, Streichungen und Zusätze, die hier im einzelnen aufzuzählen sich nicht verlohnt. (Arendt, 1955a; p.15; emphasis added)*

translated it into German, his L1.
Initially, I was convinced that this admission, made with respect to the creation of *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, provided conclusive evidence that *The Human Condition* was also the reverse self-translation of an undisclosed German draft. But, as it turns out, the book was indeed written in English and subsequently translated into a preliminary German draft by Arendt’s friend, Charlotte Beradt, a German ex-journalist now working as a hairdresser. Beradt had done several translation assignments for her before and readily accepted Arendt’s commission to create a rough German draft from *The Human Condition*. Although she is never given official credit in the book itself, Beradt is listed as the official translator of *The Human Condition* by a reliable source (Ludz, 1996).

The important point here is that *Vita activa* was not really Arendt’s translation, but rather the enhancement of a verbatim translation made by Charlotte Beradt. This explains why the two books have a near perfect sentence-for-sentence correspondence. To recapitulate the process, Arendt mentally translated her coherent German into impoverished English, which was then translated (L2 > L1) by Beradt into a German draft. Arendt’s subsequent editing of this translation would seem to explain the re-creation of an elegant German text, in spite of the distorted English of the original. That leaves the question as to how the original was created. Translation theory yields the most likely answer: mental translation.
Mental translation

Although written in English, *The Human Condition* is best viewed as an example of mental translation, or thought-to-text translation. Mental translation, also known as *interior* translation (Jung, 2002), is that type of translation that occurs when the author thinks, composes, or creates in their best language, usually (though not always) L1, and then writes those thoughts down in L2.

Julia Falla gives a useful discussion of mental translation and the errors that arise when someone writes in their L2:

In 1979, Bibeau, reflecting on the errors committed by learners as well as proficient users of the L2, elaborated a hypothesis explaining the source of these errors. He supports that when it is possible to find, in L2 errors, direct or indirect traces of the L1, it is reasonable to think that these traces are issued from associations between the L1 and L2 structures in the individual’s mind and that these structures are of the same type as those of translation. He talks about a mechanism used in the L2 that is very similar to the translation mechanism that he calls, in French, “translation.” [this looks strange but the French word for translation is *traduction*. GB]

Translation is traditionally defined as being the expression of a message in a different language from the one in which it was originally formulated. It has been studied within different perspectives, such as literary, philosophical, linguistic, pedagogical, and is considered by the latter as a teaching technique. Mental translation (MT) can be apprehended as a translation phenomenon, but taking place in the mind of the translator or the L2 learner. (Falla, n.d.\(^{28}\) underscoring added)

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Falla’s observation that “(m)ental translation ... can be apprehended as a translation phenomenon, but taking place in the mind of the translator or the L2 learner,” is a key aspect of my argument. This form of translation implies an instinctive reliance on L1 in the presence of a relative lack of familiarity with L2. According to Falla, one of the hazards of mental translation is that it raises the likelihood of erroneously incorporating L1 terminology and syntax in L2 text.

Jung, referring to this as interior self-translation, says:

Thus the bilingual writer may well practice some type of interior self-translation even if he only practices delayed self-translation or never translates his own works at all. This type of interior self-translation is very close to the concept of ‘inner language’ presented by Gössmann (1987: 40f). Gössmann describes the writing process as a transfer of thoughts from the less structured ‘inner language’ of one’s mind to the necessarily structured language of the written output. This may also involve frustrations with the difference between the inner and the outer product... (ibid. p. 26)

In sum, Hannah Arendt wrote The Human Condition by mentally translating from German. Following Jung, the translation was from the German of her “less structured ‘inner language’ of [the] mind” to the “necessarily structured language of the written output” in English. Flaws occasioned by Arendt’s translation from her inner (and accurate) L1 to her published (and frequently inaccurate) L2 are, in any case, the basis for the argument being made in this thesis.

Reverse-mental-self-translation

From the preceding, we see that Hannah Arendt’s writing of The Human Condition actually involved reverse-mental-self-translation. But mental- and self-translations are not, in and of themselves, a bad practice. The dubious choices of
terminology and phrasing that make Arendt's writing so problematic are mainly a result of the fact that she was engaged in reverse-translation, and was disinclined to submit her work to an editor. Sadly, Arendt never achieved, in English, anything even remotely resembling the level of competence that she had in German, a language she loved and continued to write and speak in, even after permanently emigrating to the United States. Her continued preference for, and dependence upon, German in her inner and private lives reveals that this may have contributed to the interference with her prowess in English. Given that she was well aware of the fact that her German was technically and conceptually superior, the question arises as to why Arendt authored this text in English. The answer must be that her U.S. market was English, and she had already authored works in that language.

It is, of course, likely that Arendt did consider herself fully competent in English. Verena Jung, however, suggests another possible reason, when she states that writing in L2 is sometimes due to "knowing that one would not be read when continuing to write in one's mother tongue and would not have the money to have one's work translated ..." (2002, p. 17). Was this the other reason that Arendt insisted on writing in English? One is tempted to say, yes.

But it is with regard to the overall attributes of a competent translation that The Human Condition must be found most wanting. The translation theorist and critic Katharina Reiss points out the requirements necessary for translation to be effective.
When translating from German to Spanish or English, on the other hand, it is necessary to consider carefully whether these [words] can carry full weight in the sentence, or only serve it with an element or nuance. The decision then has to be made whether to translate them with equivalent expressions, or to ignore them ...

This suggests another criterion for judging a translation solely on the basis of its target language: a mastery of stylistic and grammatical standards must be supported by a familiarity with idiomatic usage. (Reiss, 1986; p. 13)

It cannot be denied that, in English, Arendt never achieved the necessary “familiarity with idiomatic usage.”

Zsuzsanna Ardo, in a marvellously witty and engaging paper “Virgin Birth and Red Underpants: The Translator’s Responsibility in Shaping Our Worldview,” summarizes the point of Reiss’ argument when she says that

the issues Reiss focuses on are undoubtedly vital. In translation criticism you are looking for talent in writing, sensitivity to language, internal consistency, semantic, structural and dynamic equivalence, creative recreation of the cultural allusions, the spirit of the original, precision in and mastery of style and grammar, idiomatic usage, fidelity to the intent of the original author and the text type—just to mention a few fundamental aspects of the incredibly complex and complicated process. (Ardo, 2001)

Even a cursory analysis of Arendt’s writing will reveal that she brings few of these attributes to her role as translator. It is my contention that writing in English was, for Arendt, a matter of inner- or mental translation, and thus a task for which she was not prepared.

The mistranslation of philosophical ideas presents an obstacle to those who wish to engage with a philosophical idea but lack the ability to read the original text.
For many readers, these ideas essentially get lost in translation, and the possibility of wider debate is inhibited, if not destroyed. It therefore seems reasonable that, when large amounts of translated text are assigned for reading in higher education, consideration be given to first vetting the quality of what students are being asked to read.

Translation would not much less important if there were not such an urgent need for discourse on matters that affect the human condition. The focus of one such discussion, i.e., that on eudaemonia, is the topic of the next section.

\[29\text{http://www.translation-services-usa.com/articles/virgin-birth.shtml}\]
Discourse on eudaemonia

It ought to be safe to assert that human beings constantly search for guidance as to what constitutes eudaemonia, or the good life. I like the approach to the good life taken by John Ralston Saul:

What is the good life?... [f]rom Athens to our day this question has been the standard summary of ethics. It has been asked in many different ways, often phrased as an existential choice – What should I do? What shall I do? How should I live? In each of these questions the ‘good’ of the good life is unstated but understood. The full question is: How should I live, given the context of the larger good? The larger good assumes the existence of the other, of the family, of the community. Of the public good. (Saul, 2001; p. 68)

Coulter and Wiens (2002, p. 16) use a similar terminology when they discuss eudaemonia as the desired outcome of praxis or action:

Practice as praxis, however, aims at a different kind of end, a good and worthwhile life (eudaimonia), where the means are integral to the end (how we go about leading such a life cannot be separated from that life). Deciding what counts as a good life, acquiring the requisite knowledge and virtue, and matching that knowledge and virtue to particular situations understood correctly requires a different form of wisdom: phronesis. (ibid.)

Engaging in philosophical discourse about eudaemonia, the good and worthwhile life, was an activity central to the life of the citizen in ancient Athens. My own interest in this matter resulted in my defining eudaemonic health\(^3\) (Brauer, 2005, p. 268), and when I first came upon Arendt I was more than ready to appreciate a philosophical discussion of the nature of praxis as it contributes to eudaemonia.

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\(^3\) Eudaemonic health, as distinct from physical and mental health, is an education-mediated dimension of the human condition, the indicators of which include compassion, courage, curiosity, diligence, generosity, gentleness, honesty, humility, imagination, intelligence, objectivity, patience, responsibility, thoughtfulness, tolerance, vision, and so on.
Arendt herself also mentions the term when she refers to freedom as being “the essential condition of what the Greeks called felicity, *eudaimonia* [sic],\(^{31}\) which was an objective status depending first of all upon wealth and health” (Arendt, 1958c; p. 31). However, Arendt’s choice of words is curious – not only in saying, incorrectly, that “the Greeks called (anything) felicity.” She ought to have said: ‘the essential condition that the Greeks called *eudaimonia*, a word that I translate as felicity.’ But the word *felicity* is a static and rarely used term, and has been defined\(^{32}\) as *intense happiness*, not at all what most people think the Greeks meant by *eudaemonia*. While it has indeed been translated as ‘happiness,’ and ‘flourishing life,’ the meaning of the word is, in the present context, more usefully conveyed by the more dynamic, and understandable, concept of a *good and worthwhile life*.

The above interpretation of *eudaemonia* is, first of all, based on the concept of an action-oriented life and in addition invokes the *combination* of two clear moral criteria for such a life: virtue and value. By invoking both virtue and value, a *good and worthwhile life* thus constitutes a useful moral principle. I am tempted to recognize in this definition a private dimension (virtue) and a public one (value), but I will not pursue this; to engage in *this* discussion would thrust my thesis along another vector.

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\(^{31}\) I prefer use of the *ae* diphthong.

\(^{32}\) The Oxford English Reference Dictionary.
In contrast, Arendt’s felicity ignores both dimensions, besides lacking currency in conventional usage. The distinction between a state of mind (felicity or happiness) and life in the sense of activity is made clearly by R. J. Kilcullen:

[Aristotle] often calls the good 'happiness' (eudaimonia), which might suggest that the goal is the state of mind which follows upon good action. But this is not what he means. Eudaimonia on his account is not a state of mind; it consists in action, not in something else resulting from action. The good is 'an active life of the element that has a rational principle...life in the sense of activity.' (Ethics 1098 a5)\(^3\)

This important observation points to what the Greeks, and Arendt, valued most in this regard: the application of wisdom, *phronesis*, to guide human action, *praxis*. It is also what Hannah Arendt wants to communicate to her readers. In fact, the main thrust of her argument is the distinction that must be made among the three primary activities that humans can engage in: working to sustain life, making the artificial world humans need to live in, and acting among themselves to question and change the human condition. These will be discussed in greater detail below.

Arendt comments, correctly, that *eudaemonia* is “an objective status depending first of all upon wealth and health.” In other words, in order to be able to concern oneself with what John Ralston Saul (2001, p. 68) calls the public good, the citizen must first of all assure the private good, i.e., be physically and economically in a position to concern him- or herself with the concerns of the other. One concludes that there is an obligation to value *eudaemonia*, and to

\(^3\) [Link](http://www.humanities.mq.edu.au/Ockham/y67s08.html#6)
debate it publicly – an obligation that ought not to be avoided by those who already enjoy the security, in the private sector of life, offered by physical and financial health.

The need to publicly examine the quality of daily life becomes urgent when one examines the global political situation in which we find ourselves. It also becomes obvious that philosophical discourse, especially about eudaemonic health, ought to feature in all educational curricula, but especially in higher education. The fact that eudaemonic health and its prerequisites are not often a subject for public discussion reflects an infantilization of the citizenry and, concomitantly, a transfer of responsibility, for all political and societal ills, to “the social.” The latter is Arendt’s word for the parentalistic locus of authority and power that is deemed by some to reside in bureaucratic entities.

It is clear, from Arendt, that a concern with wisdom and action, what the Greeks call phronesis and praxis, ought not to be just a question for the academic elite, but something to be debated publicly by all concerned citizens. The non-readability of relevant philosophical ideas is, therefore, much more than just a nuisance – it represents a serious impediment to the long-term political health of civil society. Society is seriously impoverished when citizens do not engage in debating such matters.

\[34\] Here I include all levels of schooling, from primary school on up. It has been demonstrated that children can grapple with complex philosophical ideas, something that education systems around the world seem determined to stifle, presumably before the child can become a political liability.
But the purpose of this thesis is not to examine the demise of discourse in public spaces, but rather to consider the readability of those philosophical texts that might provide a foundation for such discourse in future. It is my contention that the language used in many books dealing with social philosophy is so obscure that the general reader is rendered incapable of reading, let alone debating, the relevant issues. Luckily, there are some authors who imply, by the tenor and tone of their arguments, by the practical relevance of their ideas, and, most importantly, by the easy readability of their writing, that civil society is better served when citizens (not just scholars) have both the interest and the intellectual capacity to concern themselves with *la condition humaine*. Ironically, while Hannah Arendt is explicit about the need for people “to be concerned with trouble in fields about which, in the specialist’s sense, [they] may know nothing” (1958b, p. 173), her own writing in *The Human Condition* is frequently incoherent, especially to the general reader.

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35 This is a disputed concept, mocked by Hanna Pitkin (1998) who calls it ‘the Blob.’
36 I deliberately eschew use of ‘paternalistic,’ the more common term.
37 Of greatest importance here are the social, cultural, economic, and political aspects of philosophy because these are conversations that must be engaged in by citizens. I do not complain that fields like formal logic, epistemology, phenomenology, metaphysics, etc. are couched in abstruse terms; it is probably not essential for the average citizen to engage in these debates.
38 Deliberate obscurantism as a linguistic ploy has long been recognized, among certain professionals, as an effective way of keeping the non-specialist off one’s turf.
40 “In essence civil society involves the activity of citizens in free association who lack the authority of the state... [s]uch activities [being] motivated by objectives other than profit-making.” (Swift, 1999, p. 4-5)
41 Notwithstanding Joseph Dunne who opines that Arendt “very deliberately wrote for the general reader” (1993, p. 13).
In order for a member of a civil society to engage in discourse about *eudaemonia*, he or she must, of course, possess a) the intellectual capacity, acquired by an appropriate education, to do so and b) sufficient economic and physical health to allow the allocation of the requisite time and energy. But over and above this, there must be access to the vast amount of literature that defines and delimits the cultural, economic, political, moral, ethical, and practical issues that confront the citizen of 21st century democracies. According to this logic, educational policies that interfere with the reading of, and *ergo* the debate about, important social ideas ought to be recognized as constituting a serious pedagogical problem. Such a problem may exist with regard to the policy of allowing unreadable translations to be assigned, without critical comment, to students. If it exists, and I maintain that it does, the problem has thus far gone largely unremarked in academia.

The next core concept to be addressed is, therefore, the readability of translated philosophical texts.
Readability

A *readable* text is one that is amenable to being read and understood. Arendt tends to ignore the fact that social philosophy ought to satisfy this crucial requirement. Had she been less sure of her prowess in English, she might have sought help in ensuring that her ideas are presented in understandable fashion.

In this section I wish to address the concept of readability – a condition that, to a large extent, determines how well a message, when translated from another language and culture, can be understood linguistically and grappled with. Predictably, the texts that tend to be most vulnerable with regard to a lack of readability are those that concern themselves with subtle philosophical matters, as their wording often involves concepts that are difficult to express in the original, let alone in another, language. But an interest in philosophy cannot be satisfied by staying within one’s cultural boundaries. Those interested will be driven to understand ideas that have been proposed and debated by thinkers from other cultures and languages, whose works are often available to English readers only in translation. The readability of philosophy can therefore be compromised easily by poor translation from the respective language; and when a translation is inadequate, the ideas contained therein become inaccessible.

With regard to the teaching of, or requirement for, careful reading at the post-secondary level in Canadian universities, it is hard to find references to this issue in the academic literature. University education in Canada seems, by default, to promote a form of reading that, by being both superficial and rapid, systematically
lowers the likelihood that difficult ideas will be deeply understood, let alone fully debated. Vast volumes of material are assigned for reading with a view to ensuring that essential material is covered — and little if any attempt is made to ensure that students have either the time or the intellectual preparation needed to acquire a deeper understanding of ideas and their implications for the human condition. This results in the imposition of a nearly impenetrable linguistic barrier between the reader and texts. The likelihood of such a text contributing to a generalized engagement in philosophical discourse is therefore low.

Because many of the foundation texts that underlie Western philosophy were written in German, French, Latin, or Greek, the readability of such seminal works is at risk of being compromised by invalid translations. This is important because the love of knowledge compels one to seek insight into many ideas that have been debated in the past — many of them proposed by thinkers from mainland Europe, whose works are available to English readers only in translation.

The readability of a philosophical text is especially at risk from self-translation. Although most translations are carried out by competent translators, whose mother tongue is usually the target language (the language translated into), some bilingual authors translate their works themselves — either overtly, when they translate from their own written text (in either language), or tacitly, when they translate their mental compositions (in their mother tongue) into the second

\[\text{\footnotesize \textsuperscript{42}}\text{ It's never made clear in whose opinion the material selected is essential, although one assumes that it is determined largely by the instructor involved.}\]
language. Although this may, at first, seem feasible, inadequate skill in the target language on the part of the author/translator, can result in a poor use of language. The resulting impact on the accessibility of the relevant ideas is often severe. Even if one manages, against all odds, to persevere with the reading of poorly phrased text, the philosophical ideas contained therein will remain out of reach.

The kind of barrier to reading that I am talking about is illustrated by comparing the readability of two difficult passages of text: one composed in English by the Scottish-American philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre; the other composed in German by Hannah Arendt and mentally translated into English.

Example 1:

By a ‘practice’ I am going to mean any coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity through which goods internal to that form of activity are realized in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence which are appropriate to, and partially definitive of, that form of activity, with the result that human powers to achieve excellence, and human conceptions of the ends and goods involved, are systematically extended. (MacIntyre, 1989, p. 187)

In this 74-word sentence, taken from MacIntyre’s After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory, the grammar is very complex, even tedious, and its meaning is not easily apparent. However, because its author is a native English speaker, the reader may, if nothing else, safely assume that the text says precisely what the author means for it to say. The syntax of the passage comes clear with careful reading, and the terminology adheres more or less to conventional usage – even if quasi-economic wording such as “goods internal to that form of activity” is initially a challenge.
Example 2: The following three-sentence passage, encountered early in Arendt’s *The Human Condition*, uses seven fewer words, yet confronts the reader with an altogether nasty reading experience:

The human condition comprehends more than the conditions under which life has been given to man. Men are conditioned beings because everything they come in contact with turns immediately into a condition of their existence. The world in which the vita activa [sic] spends itself consists of things produced by human activities; but the things that owe their existence exclusively to men nevertheless constantly condition their human makers. (1958c, p. 9)

The sentences are simpler and shorter than those in the MacIntyre citation. But this time, regardless of the reader’s efforts, the terminology remains obscure, the syntax dubious, and the meaning mysterious. In fact, although it sounds straightforward, the English is utter nonsense. And even if one were to eschew such a strong opinion, it is undeniable that the passage is sufficiently awkward to be unreadable by anyone not already familiar with Arendtian notions. How can this be explained? The situation becomes clear when it is realized that Arendt was not a native English speaker and her English was a product of reverse self-translation (see previous sections), something which Arendt was not competent to perform. Incidentally, her German translation of this passage is elegant and, while difficult, quite clear.

*Nun umfasst aber die Condition Humaine, die menschliche Bedingtheit im Ganzen, mehr als nur die Bedingungen, unter denen dem Mensch das Leben auf der Erde gegeben ist. Menschen sind bedingte Wesen, weil ein jegliches, womit sie in Berührung kommen, sich unmittelbar in eine Bedingung ihrer Existenz verwandelt. Die Welt in der die Vita activa sich bewegt, besteht im Wesentlichen aus Dingen, die Gebilde vom Menschenhand sind; und diese Dinge, die ohne den Menschen nie entstanden wären, sind wiederum Bedingung menschlicher Existenz.* (Arendt, 1960, p. 16)
In contrast to the MacIntyre example, the erratic terminology and phrasing of the Arendtian passage do not conform to conventional English usage, and therefore constitute significant obstacles to reading and comprehension. In fact, in the German version of this passage Arendt says something quite different than she does in the English version.

With regard to the first, tortuous but more readable passage by MacIntyre, it is interesting to note that reviewer Matthew Ray (2002, p. 1), in discussing three of MacIntyre’s books, asserts that: “Alasdair MacIntyre is one of the most innovative philosophers writing in untechnical [sic] English today.”\(^{43}\) If “untechnical” language makes difficult philosophy more accessible, the question ought to be asked: Why doesn’t every social philosopher, whose thoughts ought to be relevant to our quest for *eudaemonia*, write in non-technical language?

It is also legitimate to ask whether or not the differences in readability between original and translated texts ought to be more widely acknowledged in university courses that rely heavily on the reading and debating of translated texts – i.e., where the original texts are not considered. To me it is a simple matter of utility (leaving aside educational ethics): It is surely a practice of dubious utility to require students to read translated philosophical material that, upon closer scrutiny, obscures rather than sets forth the author’s ideas. If students are unaware that they have not understood the philosophical literature they read, it is also predictable that readability will receive little attention. But the
consequences, e.g., for the public debate of *eudaemonia*, are not hard to predict, and can be read in the daily headlines.

I soon became obsessed with wanting to understand how such problems in readability could have come about. One day, as I found myself wishing I could have engaged Arendt in a discussion on the matter, it occurred to me that I might, in a virtual and indirect way, be able to do just this in a fictional exchange of letters with Arendt, simply by using her own words from her German translation of *The Human Condition*. The more I thought about it, the more excited I became at the possibilities. The format of personal correspondence would facilitate a collegial, yet critical, dialogue with Arendt and thus create the opportunity to examine the readability of her text, without having to resort to a one-sided analysis of the problematic passages.

This device, which I have called *The Epistolary*, adds three dimensions to my thesis. First, the Epistolary is an attention-grabbing literary device, presenting a fictional argument between two correspondents; it saves my critique of her readability from becoming tediously one-sided. A detailed and iterative (sometimes unavoidably redundant) interrogation of Arendt allows me to challenge the readability of selected passages from *The Human Condition*, while giving Arendt the opportunity to explain herself. Second, an exchange of letters allowed me to assume a more challenging tone. I felt that the nature and extent of the flaws in Arendt’s text made it necessary to express strongly-worded opinions.

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The Epistolary allows me to express my opinions about Arendt’s readability in a forceful way; one that would not have been possible had I used the conventionally dispassionate academic style. The latter, as used in conventional theses, is by definition unsuited to the kind of passion that the debate called for. Finally, the device opens the dialogue to an authentic Arendtian voice. Arendt’s substantive (as opposed to the conversational) ‘replies’ to my queries are taken verbatim from the corresponding passages in *Vita activa*, and thus constitute an authentic, if limited, voice in an argument that would not otherwise be heard.

With regard to the conversational aspects of the correspondence, I wanted to situate my voice and that of Arendt in a slightly tense confrontation. On purely logical grounds (her errors are, upon examination, self-evident), it was necessary to have Arendt come to agree with many of my points. However, her correspondence with her friends (Arendt and Broch, 1996; Arendt and Heidegger, 1998/2004; Arendt and Jaspers, 1985/1992) and her husband (Arendt and Blücher, 1996/2000) suggest that she was not one to fold in the face of criticism. I was, therefore, compelled on occasion to give her voice a defensive, sometimes even mildly truculent, tone. My own voice is deliberately fractious, corresponding both to my contrarian nature and to my strong belief that Arendt’s thoughtlessness with regard to her readability is inexcusable.

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44 Arendt’s unfortunate use of this word will feature in a subsequent section of the thesis.
Dear Professor Arendt,

Allow me to introduce myself. My name is Gerhard Brauer and I am a great fan of your writings. As a post-war émigré from Germany, I was particularly intrigued and impressed by your insightful book on totalitarianism. I was initially just as delighted to see your new book, *The Human Condition*. However, in trying to read it, I found that, very often, I could not understand you. Indeed, I found myself wishing you had written it in German.

It is with some trepidation that I write to you today, as I am seeking your help with regard to my struggle to understand what you have written in *The Human Condition*. Let me give you an example of my discomfort. I am confused with the meaning of the very first paragraph. Here you have written something that doesn’t make sense to me:
With the term vita activa, I propose to designate three fundamental human activities: labor, work, and action. They are fundamental because each corresponds to one of the basic conditions under which life on earth has been given to man.

The first sentence is awkward and the second one defies understanding (and the meaning is not clarified in the subsequent text). I see labour and work as being pretty much synonymous, so I don't know what you are getting at. Also I don't know what you mean by "the basic conditions under which life on earth has been given to man." When I consider that you are dealing here with common sense issues regarding how human activities can be categorized, I can see no good reason for such tortuous wording. Can you help me out here?

Sincerely, Gerhard Brauer
Dear Mr. Brauer,

I received your letter with surprise and pleasure. I appreciate a reader who is willing to read my material so carefully. Please write to me - I invite your questions. I am glad you are German, perhaps I can clarify matters for you also in our mother tongue.

With regard to your question concerning that paragraph, it is possible that you do not recognize the distinctions I wish to make between labor and work. I think you do not understand that my usage of 'labor' is as the translation of 'Arbeit', and 'work' refers to the gerund 'Herstellen', in the sense of 'works of art,' and so on. I think you will agree that it is an acceptable translation.

If this is the matter which you wish to discuss with me, I think you should first try to understand the difference in my meaning between labor and work.

I am not yet certain as to what it is exactly that you find difficult in my writing but I think that you will explain this very soon. Yes?

Cordially yours, Hannah Arendt
Dear Prof. Arendt

You mention the distinction you make between *Herstellen* and *Arbeit*.

That is a good place to start explaining my problem. I don’t know quite how to proceed, so allow me to give you my perspective on these words:

a) *Arbeit* translates adequately as ‘labour’; *der Arbeiter* is, in most instances, a labourer, not a maker (*Hersteller*) of things, and *arbeiten* is indeed concerned with survival. The fit, however, isn’t perfect, as other aspects of ‘to labour,’ such as ‘laboured’ and ‘belaboured,’ are completely missing from *Arbeit*. It seems to me that *Arbeit* and ‘labor’ are not at all congruent. The better translation of *Arbeit* might be ‘work.’

b) *Herstellen*, on the other hand, cannot be translated as ‘work’; the verb *herstellen* clearly conveys the idea of fabrication or making, i.e., the human preoccupation with the manufacture of things that have concreteness, or *Gegenständlichkeit*. Your reference to ‘works of art’ is correct but it is not the most common application of the term. The word ‘work,’ used by itself in a phrase, is, in fact, best translated as *Arbeit*. If the other meaning is intended, one usually says ‘a work’ or ‘works.’

Without meaning to be rude, you seem to be unaware that some words have conventional meanings that differ from your usage. When these terms are asked to carry the weight of your ideas they often fail to do so; certainly with regard to the reader who is new to your ideas. My fear is that if your words do not find a ready home in the English reader’s world of expression, they create a break in continuity and, consequently, a serious impediment to reading and
understanding. Had I been your editor, I would have suggested that whenever you intend to attach special meaning to a term, you circumscribe your definitions with generous examples, so that unusual meanings might be understood and their usage accepted. As it stands, the terseness of your expressions creates problems.

The second sentence is more problematic. The grammar is simple, the words are straightforward and yet, to the English-hearing ear, the words defy common sense. What do you mean by "the basic conditions under which life on earth has been given to man"? In the first place, life on earth was not given to man under any conditions – unless you read Genesis as a Christian literalist, which I do not and I would be surprised if you do. And second, what do you mean by 'conditions'?

I am really grateful for your willingness to engage with me about my problem with reading your book.

Having said this, I still do not understand that first sentence.

Sincerely, Gerhard Brauer
Dear Mr. Brauer,

If I were not in such a good mood I might feel insulted after your harsh demolition of even my most basic words. But I am smiling as I write this, because I have the feeling that you have at heart the interests of the naïve reader - something that does not concern me so much. I sense also that you wish to identify obstacles to reading and understanding which are based in the trivialities, such as choice of the perfect word, translational fine points, idiomatic amplifications, etc. Am I correct in this?

If this is so, then I think I understand now what you wish to do. You wish for me to explain those passages in HC that you have called difficult. This is a good idea and may help me in perhaps writing a second edition - although I doubt that I shall be in a mood to do this any time soon. We can discuss this and I can tell you what I wanted to say in German. Perhaps you can then come to a better understanding of what I wish to say, and I can get a sense of how my English might be made more accessible to the novice reader. In any case, I am willing to engage with you in this rather interesting exercise.

Your analysis of Arbeiten and Herstellen is fascinating. I had not thought about the other possible meanings of my English words, because I know already that words are never perfect or final. But your observations are not unreasonable. If I understand you, you are suggesting
that, with my English books, I am not making friends easily. That makes me of course unhappy.

What you say about Herstellen is even a bigger problem for me. Am I to understand that 'work' does not give this meaning of a man-made world? Please tell me more clearly what you mean. If 'works of art' is correct, why does this not allow me to translate Herstellen as work? I find myself unable to agree with your assessment.

I have given your other question much thought. In order to explain it to you, I think the best is perhaps if I give you the wording I have in my German draft notes. Then you will get the idea and you can see that this is what I am saying also in English.


This is the meaning I had in mind for that paragraph. I think this is the best way to proceed.

Cordially yours, Hannah Arendt
Dear Prof. Arendt

Thank you for your letter. I am delighted that you will work with me on this project; and you are completely right in your view of my concern for the naïve reader. Hearing what you meant in German will help a great deal.

Your unhappiness at finding that your words may not be having the intended effect on the English-speaking readership is understandable, and I am sorry to be the bearer of such negative news. But your ideas are too important to allow unnecessary barriers to comprehension to persist. Authoritarian political trends will not be as vigorously resisted if we do not first learn to understand and heed arguments such as yours. Thus, while your ideas may be debated by academics, it is vital that they be also known, understood, and widely discussed by the educated citizenry. Scholars alone will not stave off totalitarianism – a population of well-read and courageous citizens might.

What I propose to do is identify passages in HC that are obscure and present a barrier to reading. Such passages interrupt the flow of reading – when that happens one’s attention slips, doubt as to what was meant creeps in, and the magic of the teachable moment is lost. Having identified such passages, I would ask that you explain to me what it is you mean. Our task will then be to try to find a way of expressing it so that a better translation of your text might be created. Does that sound like a feasible idea? Let’s try it out on the sentence I first asked you about.

With regard to our specific example, I have read the German passage carefully and, contrary to what I experienced with the English version, I find it not in the slightest confusing. I think that the problem may be one of translation.
For a start, you ought not to translate “sollen ... zusammengefaßt werden,” as “[to] propose to designate as” – the word ‘designate’ implies an unintended degree of agency on your part, and the phrase fails to convey the connotation of ‘gathering together’ that is so clearly stated in the German. Furthermore, it is confusing, in part even incorrect, to translate your three core concepts, Arbeiten, Herstellen and Handeln as labor, work, and action. Your German words would have been better translated into the gerund form, as toiling, making, and acting. Here is how I have translated your German:

In the following, I propose to use the term vita activa (i.e., the active life) as encompassing three basic human activities: toiling, making, and acting. They are basic activities because each of them corresponds to one of the basic aspects of human life on earth.

And, although I understand what you are saying in German, you ought not refer to “the basic conditions under which life on earth has been given to man.” In English this raises issues of religion that are not easily accepted. Furthermore, you are not, in the German, talking about “the basic conditions” but rather ‘basic necessities or even aspects.’ In this context, the word ‘conditions’ is confusing. Perhaps now you can sense how, with the original English, you will lose some readers, especially those that have no academic preparation in, or commitment to, philosophy.

[...]

Sincerely, Gerhard Brauer
Dear Mr. Brauer,

Please excuse the long delay in answering to your letter.

I quite like your translation. Of course it is clear that in the German version there are thoughts that did not translate well into English. I will give this some thoughts in the coming days.

I hope to hear from you soon again.

Cordially yours, Hannah Arendt
Dear Professor Arendt

[...]

To continue with our examination of the text, I have more problems with the opening passages of the book (HC pp. 7-8). In order to define the three aspects of the vita activa, you conclude each of three paragraphs with three important definitive statements. Unfortunately, they make no sense. Let us examine the first of these:

"The human condition of labor is life itself."

Grammatically, the statement is flawless, and when read in a cursory manner it provokes no negative reaction – but when carefully considered it simply baffles me. What does it refer to, this ‘human condition of labor’? In English one may speak of the ‘human condition’ but one does not speak of a human condition of something. If nothing else, it is so awkward a phrase as to make me unwilling to trust in the validity of what I am reading.

Important thoughts ought to be facilitated with explicative phrases, not merely pronounced in a curt manner. I would have much preferred to see you use several clear examples to augment your assertions. Your ideas are important, and merely by providing explanations you would have enhanced the readability of your book immeasurably.

[...]

Sincerely, Gerhard Brauer
Dear Mr. Brauer,

Although I am still feeling a little bit rebuffed by your tone, I think perhaps I am too sensitive.

I have been re-reading HC and of course wish that I had a chance to write some things in a different way. I have my whole life been thinking about how we must live in the world, and I surely do not want to put barriers in the way of the reader’s comprehension. I therefore appreciate your helping me find a better way of stating some of my ideas in English. Perhaps one day I can republish selected chapters in less difficult English.

About the statement on labor, which reflects the main idea of the preceding paragraph, I cannot find better words in English. The best way would be, I think, for me simply to give you the sentence as I would say it in German:

Die Grundbedingung, unter der die Tätigkeit des Arbeitens steht, ist das Leben selbst.

Cordially yours, Hannah Arendt
Dear Prof. Arendt

[...]

To get back to our project, your German version is much more readable – unfortunately, as in previous instances, the words do not correspond very well with the published English. Here is my analysis:

In the case of the sentence on ‘labour,’ you said: “Die Grundbedingung, unter der die Tätigkeit des Arbeitens steht, ist das Leben selbst.” The problem arises when you allow the word human to act as adjective to condition – this is not what you mean at all. There can be no doubt that with “die Grundbedingung, unter der die Tätigkeit des Arbeitens steht” you are referring to ‘the basic condition (or aspect) of human existence that corresponds to the activity of labour’ and not, as you have it, to ‘the human condition of labour.’ Translating and paraphrasing this into a simpler syntax yields:

The activity of labour addresses that basic condition (or aspect) of human existence which corresponds to the need to stay alive; i.e., human beings labour in order to survive.

This statement is easily understandable and a very far cry indeed from saying that “[t]he human condition of labor is life itself.” Can you see now how your English puts an obstacle in the path of the reader?

Perhaps the established scholar with a prior knowledge of your work will manage to figure out what you mean to say with the original statement which, for anyone else, is a serious barrier to comprehension. What you said in German, however, is quite different, and totally coherent.

Having now had the opportunity to hear what you said in German, I understand what you are getting at. But what about all those other readers.... ? I
see this as a serious problem, because when readers come across incoherent statements they falter in their reading. They will either stop reading or carry on without understanding. When that happens with regard to important ideas, the consequences are not positive.

[...] 

Sincerely yours, Gerhard Brauer
Dear Mr. Brauer,

Your translation is very nice, and I confess that I like your version better than 'the human condition of labor', etc. To me there isn't so much difference, but I believe you when you say that my rendering is not as clear as it might be. When I read the German, and then your English, I feel that the latter reflects exactly what I mean. And then, when I reread the English of HC I see what you mean - the language is certainly not as clear. I think I was sometimes aware of this but I did not think it too important.

Before we get more deeply engaged in a systematic analysis of my semantic prowess, perhaps I might suggest that we discuss the point of what we are doing. While I recognize the difficulty you mentioned in an early letter, I am now somewhat despairing of a good answer to the question: How should one write? How should one translate? If we do not intend to address this, I will have trouble understanding what we will gain from this project.

I know that in putting my German ideas into English I have not been always successful. I rely on the assistance of editorial staff and co-workers, but only for spelling and grammar. I do not ask for their advice concerning the choice of words and the meaning of my statements. In any case they do not have the ability to edit my text for conceptual correctness.
Ideally, of course, philosophical works (!) are best read in the original formulations. But can we today ask students to learn so many languages? My exposure to American students at Princeton leads me to think that this is no a prize-winning idea.

As I mentioned already, I was first a little put out by your challenging tone, but I think now it is alright. If you think that there are errors then you must say so. Let us carry on and see what is the extent of the problem as you see it.

Cordially yours, Hannah Arendt
Dear Prof. Arendt

Thank you for being kind – and I apologize for my churlish tone. I can get carried away by my frustration at the fact that, due to language problems, your ideas are not more easily available to others.

With regard to students, should they learn the language of the authors they have to deal with? Absolutely. I think that one should be able to read any work in the original – serious students should be required, at least with regard to those languages that are most important to the study of Western philosophy (including Latin and Greek), to struggle with the original phrases and words. But that practice has fallen into disfavour. Here in Canada, like in the U.S., it is getting increasingly difficult to get graduate students to learn even one foreign language, let alone three or four. But that is a different battle, and one to be fought another day.

With regard to our discussion, I agree that there must be a practical point to them, but we must first agree that there is a problem. At this point, I want to tease out what you really mean, and why, in my opinion, some of your English is so hard to understand.

To go back to the problematic passages I was critiquing, I would like to examine a paragraph that caused me a lot of difficulty. On page 7, following the sentence on labour that we just looked at, you say:

Work is the activity which corresponds to the unnaturalness of human existence, which is not imbedded 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 is housed, while this

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45 not to mention the languages required for the study of Russian, Arabic and Oriental thought
world itself is meant to outlast and transcend them all. The human condition of work is worldliness.

I take it that this terse paragraph, which is not preceded or followed by clarification, is your definition of the activity of 'work.' But I put it to you that the reader cannot make sense of phrases like 'the unnaturalness of human existence,' which is somehow 'not imbedded in ... the species' ever-recurring lifecycle.' This sentence is a real problem for me, and I hope you can shed light on it.

Sincerely, Gerhard Brauer
Dear Mr. Brauer,

Your last letter has given me much to think about. With regard to what happens with the reception of my text, I can only speculate. But no matter which way I look at the situation, I realize now that this re-examination of my wording and grammar, while painful, is going to be worthwhile.

Here is what I really meant to say in the passage you refer to in your letter:


I hope you can do something with this.

Cordially yours, Hannah Arendt
Dear Professor Arendt

I had much less difficulty with your German paragraph, which I would translate as follows:

In the human activity of 'making' is made manifest the unnaturalness [artificialness?] of a being that, while dependent on Nature, cannot simply submit to the ever-recurring life-cycle of the species, and that finds no compensation for its mortality as an individual in the potential immortality of the group. The activity of making creates an artificial world of things; things that do not simply align themselves with natural things, but are distinct from these in as much as they, to a certain extent, resist Nature and are not simply ground up by the living processes (of Nature). Human beings, by nature not at home in Nature, are at home in this world of things; and, to the extent to which it outlasts, withstands, and confronts human life (being object-based and concrete), this artificial world offers humans a home. The activity of 'making' corresponds to that basic condition of human existence which is a dependence on the concreteness of the artificial human world.

The paragraph is now a clear explanation of why the artificial world, created by 'making,' is such an integral part of the human condition. The improvement, especially in clarity, is self-evident. Please note that while you can indeed translate Weltlichkeit as 'worldliness,' the latter is a word that, in English, has a moral connotation, and is not appropriate in this context. In English, your special interpretation of Weltlichkeit cannot simply be stated by one word. I am sure you are aware that already in German the word has more of a moralistic than a naturalistic connotation. So, in my opinion, the barrier to reading arises already in the German – you are not adequately emphasizing the mundane or physical slant to your use of both terms, Weltlichkeit and worldliness.

Sincerely, Gerhard Brauer
Dear Mr. Brauer,

Your analysis of that last paragraph has given me much to think about. No matter which way I look at the original text, I agree that the English is not perfect. But I must also say that I do not find my English to be so totally wrong. When I read it, I find that it is mostly saying what I mean.

Perhaps you are making too much of a small matter

Cordially yours, Hannah Arendt
Dear Prof. Arendt

[...]  

To return to our debate, I have to say that your translation of words is not the only problem. Often I encounter syntactical awkwardness and even errors that make reading very difficult. For instance, I am not sure what you mean by the following sentence. I have italicized the problems (one is semantic and the other syntactic) and would ask that you clarify these phrases for me:

It is highly unlikely that we, who can know, determine, and define the natural essences of all things surrounding us, which we are not, should ever be able to do the same for ourselves – this would be like jumping over our own shadows (p. 10).

The “which we are not” is the most problematic, it is unclear what it is you are referring to with the word ‘which.’ In addition, the idea of ‘natural essences of all things’ puzzles me, as I am not aware of any essences that relate to our discussion. I suspect a semantic issue here.

Sincerely yours, Gerhard Brauer
Dear Mr. Brauer,

I would like to explain some of these ideas to you, but perhaps it will be better if you start by making sense of my German first. We can always enlarge on those ideas when you have translated this passage to your satisfaction.

Es ist höchst unwahrscheinlich, daß wir, die wir das Wesen der Dinge, die uns umgeben und die wir nicht sind, also das Wesen irdischer und vielleicht einiger Dinge in dem die Erde umgebenen Universum, erkennen, bestimmen und definieren können, auch das Gleiche für uns selbst zu leisten imstande sind - als könnten wir wirklich über unseren eigenen Schatten springen. ... 

Cordially yours, Hannah Arendt
Dear Prof. Arendt

[...]

In your German original, you question whether or not we will be able, or should even try, to determine the nature of ‘human beings.’ This is an important concept, yet it doesn’t come across effectively in the English – and certainly not to the untrained reader. In the interest of clarity, I have done a line-by-line juxtaposition. In order to facilitate a word-by-word comparison, I have rearranged, moved and italicized the elements of the predicate clause “erkennen, bestimmen, und definieren können.”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>English version:</th>
<th>Your German:</th>
<th>My translation:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>It is highly unlikely that we, who can know, determine, and define the natural essences of all things surrounding us, which we are not, should ever be able to do the same for ourselves – this would be like jumping over our own shadows.</td>
<td>Es ist höchst unwahrscheinlich, daß wir, die wir können erkennen, bestimmen und definieren das Wesen der Dinge, die uns umgeben und die wir nicht sind, ... auch das Gleiche für uns selbst zu leisten imstande sind – als könnten wir wirklich über unseren eigenen Schatten springen.</td>
<td>It is highly unlikely that we, who can recognize, ascertain, and define the nature of those things that exist around us, excluding ourselves, ... should be able to achieve the same for ourselves – as though we could actually jump over our own shadows.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

First, you have translated the verb *erkennen* (to recognize) incorrectly as ‘to know’ (*kennen* or *wissen*). I have used ‘to recognize,’ and I think you will agree that it works better.

Second, ‘*das Wesen der Dinge, die uns umgeben*’ cannot be translated as ‘the natural essences of all things surrounding us.’ The
concept of ‘natural essences’ is usually reserved for things like volatile oils. I suspect that what you really mean is ‘the nature of things.’

Furthermore, the phrase ‘surrounding us’ doesn’t adequately portray what is implied by ‘die uns umgeben.’ The latter term is more correctly translated, in this context, as ‘that exist around us,’ a term which then, incidentally, immediately makes room for, and sense of, the exclusion of human beings themselves, i.e., ‘und die wir nicht sind.’

Third, the English clause ‘which we are not’ flanked by commas confounds the sense of the sentence. A native English speaker would not use this wording to exclude the ‘us’ from the ‘all things,’ as you intend. Your German is quite clear. The clause ‘und die wir nicht sind’ is not equivalent to ‘which we are not.’ The definite article ‘die’ (in ‘die wir nicht sind’) can in this instance only refer to the plural noun ‘Dinge’ and not to the singular noun ‘Wesen.’

In English, on the other hand, the ‘which’ (in ‘which we are not’) is confusing, as it could refer a) to ‘things,’ b) to the following verb ‘are able to,’ or even c) to ‘natural essences’; there is no natural referent, especially as ‘things’ are not customarily the object of ‘we are.’ The absence of the linking article ‘die’ makes the English incoherent. The confusion can be remedied by the words ‘excluding ourselves.’

Furthermore, the clause ‘which we are not’ does not suffice to lead the reader’s mind to the implicit verb ‘to be;’ there is, instead, an immediate and mistaken inclination to look to the preceding predicates (e.g., “know,
determine, and define”) that might be referred to by the ‘which.’ Such ambiguity is very frustrating for the reader.

In sum, the syntax of this important paragraph is confusing, often incorrect, where the corresponding German is clear.

Looking forward to hearing from you, I remain sincerely yours,

Gerhard Brauer
Dear Mr. Brauer,

What an effort you have made! It is so very detailed - perhaps even a bit laborious? But it is interesting too. For now I will just say that I can find no fault with your translation - it says what I wanted to say a bit better than the English that I had at first written.

I am happy to agree with your final assessment. But do not imagine that you will have it always so easy. I am of course laughing as I say this.

Cordially yours, Hannah Arendt
Dear Prof. Arendt

[...]

With regard to our literary project, let me turn to another terminological difficulty I encountered on pages 15-16. There you say that:

[c]ompared with this attitude of quiet, all distinctions and articulations within the *vita activa* disappear. Seen from the viewpoint of contemplation, it does not matter what disturbs the necessary quiet, as long as it is disturbed.

Now, I understand the role of ‘quiet’ in the *vita contemplativa*, and the fact that the *vita activa* is everything but quiet; where I have a difficulty is with your statement that “all distinctions and articulations within the *vita activa* disappear.” Surely there are distinctions and articulations that hold sway in the *vita contemplativa*. I cannot, for instance, even begin to imagine how thought, which the *vita contemplativa* generates – else it couldn’t be the vantage point you discuss later in the paragraph – can occur in the absence of said distinctions and articulations.

[...]

Sincerely, Gerhard Brauer
Dear Mr. Brauer

I have re-read your comments and am trying to understand better what you say. I think perhaps that I do not perceive the problems with my English like you do. It is hard for me to accept the problem, because I do not hear it in English at all - I think mostly in German when I am wondering about ideas.

You are right that my language in the paragraph you refer to is not so clear. In German, the passage could be written as follows:

Angesichts dieser Haltung volliger Stille verschwinden alle Unterscheidungen und Gliederungen innerhalb der Vita activa als solcher. Vom Standpunkt der Kontemplation aus betrachtet, spielt es keine Rolle mehr, was die ihr notwendige Ruhe stört; hier wird alles, was Bewegung oder Tätigkeit ist, unterschiedlos zur Störung.

I am sorry but I don’t see how one can say it better in English.

Cordially yours, Hannah Arendt
Dear Professor Arendt,

Here is my translation of your German words. The problematic wording in HC is underscored, and the key (and erroneous) phrase at the end is italicized:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Original English</th>
<th>German version</th>
<th>My translation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>This eternity discloses itself to mortal eyes only when all human movements and activities are at perfect rest.</td>
<td>Es ist dieses Ewigsein, das sich den veränderlichen Sterblichen nur enthüllen kann, wenn sie mit allen Bewegungen und Tätigkeiten an sich halten und völlig zur Ruhe gekommen sind.</td>
<td>It is this eternal ‘being’ that can only unveil itself to changeable mortals when they have ceased all movement and activity, and have come completely to rest.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Compared with this attitude of quiet, all distinctions and articulations within the vita activa disappear.</td>
<td>Angesichts dieser Haltung volliger Stille verschwinden alle Unterscheidungen und Gliederungen innerhalb der Vita activa als solcher.</td>
<td>In view of this attitude of complete stillness all discrimination and structure within the vita activa as such disappear.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seen from the viewpoint of contemplation, it does not matter what disturbs the necessary quiet,</td>
<td>Vom Standpunkt der Kontemplation aus betrachtet, spielt es keine Rolle mehr, was die ihr notwendige Ruhe stört;</td>
<td>Considered from the vantage point of contemplation, it does not matter what disturbs the silence necessary for it (contemplation);</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>as long as it is disturbed.</td>
<td>hier wird alles, was Bewegung oder Tätigkeit ist, unerschiedlos zur Störung.</td>
<td>here (in the state of contemplation) every activity or movement, no matter what, becomes a disturbance.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The opening sentence has several errors that impede easy reading. First, “dieses Ewigsein” (i.e., dieses ewige Sein) must be translated something like ‘this unending (state of) being.’ The concept of ‘eternity’ is best rendered in German as Ewigkeit. Second, the reference to “mortal eyes” is unhelpful, if not downright erroneous. An eternal state of being, or any immortal concept, would not under normal circumstances ‘disclose itself to mortal eyes,’ or any eyes for that matter;
however, it might well unveil itself to mortals *per se*, which is actually what you say in German. Third, it is incorrect to say that “human movements and activities are at perfect rest,” when it is the movement and activity (both singular) of individuals that is meant. The term ‘human movements’ is, generally speaking, limited to use with regard to socio-political activities engaged in by the masses and never refers to movement *per se*. Again, comparing the original English with a translation of your German version reveals that the latter makes sense where the former does not.

In the second sentence the words ‘compared with’ are of dubious utility, because there is no comparison. Your German ‘angesichts’ suggests that you really meant ‘in view of,’ wording that is now clear.

The third sentence is the most incoherent. The fragment ‘as long as it is disturbed’ is syntactically inappropriate – unless you mean to insist that the necessary quiet *should* be disturbed, which you obviously do not. Your German version, on the other hand, is fully and readily understandable. This is another example of how idiomatic English can contain subtle distinctions that, if misapplied, can render a text inaccessible.

I get from your German that contemplation refers to a deeply spiritual activity, like meditation; yet this is a dimension largely absent in the English text. This is unfortunate, as the *vita contemplativa* is important to your argument, inasmuch as it is a higher vantage point from which the *vita activa* can be judged. In fact, on page 16, in the paragraph that immediately follows the one dissected above, this distinction is obliterated in the English, in which you state:
Traditionally, therefore, the term vita activa receives its meaning from the vita contemplativa [sic]; its very restricted dignity is bestowed upon it because it serves the needs and wants of contemplation in a living body.

On superficial reading, this sentence provides little difficulty (alas, it provides even less insight). Upon a closer reading, it is not clear what you have in mind. For instance, I fail to understand how “the term vita activa receives its meaning from the vita contemplativa,” and I'm certain that you do not mean this. Furthermore, the second part of the sentence is grammatically dubious.

I hope you can see why this is such a problem for me.

[...]

Sincerely, Gerhard Brauer
Dear Gerhard (after more than a year of correspondence, I feel we know each other well enough to use first names - it happens very fast in America, anyway),

[...]

I like your version of the passage concerning that which disturbs the vita contemplativa. I will think about what I was thinking when I wrote that. My way to say it was perhaps not the absolutely correct one.

The actual relationship between the VA and the VC is of course not so simple as my words seem to imply. Given that neither of the two vitae can sensu stricto be considered to have an existence in and of themselves, any relationship between them is tenuous at the best. They are conceptual devices to help me categorize the various ways in which we 'are' in the world. My wish was more to point to some form of perspectivity which must obtain when one is engaged in either one of the two modi operandi, as well as to indicate that, traditionally, there is a natural priority assigned to the vita contemplativa.

With regard to the quotation from HC. Let me say to you, unequivocally, that I did not mean to imply that the vita contemplativa bestows meaning on the vita activa. That would be a nonsense. However, it is clear to me that the nature of the vita activa is indeed to be judged from the viewpoint of the vita contemplativa. But I agree that a
quick reading of the passage might lead to a misunderstanding.

In German I would write:

im Sinne der Tradition wird also das Wesen der Vita activa vom Standpunkt der Vita contemplativa her bestimmt ...

I am here implying that human life, which includes labour, work, and political action, is and remains undefined unless and until its sense with regard to the larger scheme of things is defined from a position outside of itself (which I define as the VC), by a thinking person. Certainly the VC itself does not, and can not, bestow anything at all. This I tried to make clear in the second part of the sentence, but I agree that it, too, is a little bit awkward. Allow me to give you the German wording of the latter part of that sentence:

und die beschränkte Anerkennung, die ihr (Vita activa) immerhin zuteil wird, wird ihr verliehen sofern sie der Bedürftigkeit eines lebendigen Körpers, an den die Kontemplation gebunden bleibt, dient.

I look forward to seeing how your translation differs from mine.

Sincerely yours, Hannah
Dear Hannah,

[...]

I have now translated the German version of the problematic passage.

Here are the two versions: a (published English) and b (your German):

(a) Traditionally, therefore, the term vita activa receives its meaning from the vita contemplativa; its very restricted dignity is bestowed upon it because it serves the needs and wants of contemplation in a living body (p. 16);

(b) Im Sinne der Tradition wird also das Wesen der Vita activa vom Standpunkt der Vita contemplativa her bestimmt und die beschränkte Anerkennung, die ihr (Vita activa) immerhin zuteil wird, wird ihr verliehen sofern sie der Bedürftigkeit eines lebendigen Körpers, an den die Kontemplation gebunden bleibt, dient.

My translation would go something like this:

Traditionally therefore, the nature of the vita activa is defined, not from within itself but from (the position of someone who has retreated to) the vita contemplativa; the limited recognition, that the vita activa still manages to achieve, is awarded to it as long as (or to the extent that) it serves the needs of a living body, which remains necessary for contemplation.

And now the sentence, although still rough, makes more sense – I hope you can see how the meaning has improved.

In the second clause of the sentence, Anerkennung cannot be translated as ‘dignity,’ it is more properly seen as ‘recognition’ or ‘approval.’ Given its reflexive tone (in the sense that dignity is sensed by both the entity with dignity and its perceiver), the word ‘dignity’ (it would have been Würde in German) is simply out of place here. ‘Recognition,’ on the other hand, like Anerkennung, is based on the verb stem ‘to know’ (L. cognoscere; G. kennen) and both imply a
status that is awarded or loaned to it unilaterally ("wird ihr verliehen") largely from outside of itself, and is thus consistent with the rest of the sentence.

Then, the German word sofern (literally, so far) is best translated by the phrases 'provided that,' 'as long as,' or 'to the extent that,' but not by 'because.' The difference in meaning may not be dramatic – but the loss of coherence is immediate. Furthermore, nowhere in the German is there mention of "the needs and wants of contemplation in a living body," and, while explanatory wording is to be applauded, this particular phrase does not yield greater clarity.

A loose rephrasing (my translation) would now go like this:

Traditionally, and from the perspective of those given to contemplation, the nature of the \textit{vita activa} was accorded some limited recognition, but only to the extent that it served the needs of the physical body, without which contemplation, the purpose of the \textit{vita contemplativa}, cannot occur.

In the original English, this meaning does not surface readily. My translation, on the other hand, supports your argument about the relative natures of the \textit{vita activa} and the \textit{vita contemplativa}.

The fact that English-only students do not have an opportunity to wrestle with as clear and as accessible a statement as that which you provided in German, is worth thinking about.

Sincerely,

Gerhard
Dear Gerhard,

Your assessment of my statements on relationship between the vita activa and the vita contemplativa is interesting. But your conclusion seems unnecessarily strong. I wonder if you do not place too much emphasis on precise meanings. Perhaps it is enough to gain a rough view of the point I am making. I will give this more thought, but I think you may be overdoing it with your criticisms of the small things.

[...]

Having had a chance to reread your latest letter, I now agree a bit more with your evaluation. I see the two versions, yours and mine, as differing substantially, with yours more accurately reflecting my intended meaning. This is of course disturbing, but I am becoming convinced that a complete reworking of the English text may be necessary.

It also makes me wonder about the impact of translation on meaning of text and on the realization of the intent of the author. If I decide that HC would indeed benefit from a second edition, paying attention primarily to vocabulary and syntax, will you help me do the necessary editing?

Sincerely, Hannah
Dear Hannah

I am encouraged that you think HC might benefit from a new edition, and would be delighted to help you with this task.

Of course, with regard to the reading of difficult passages, understanding is also often hampered by the way readings tend to be assigned (i.e., way too much material to be read during a 13-week term). I therefore fear that even with a new edition your ideas will not have the impact that they should have simply because they cannot be read with adequate care and reflection.

Regarding your comment that it might be enough if people “gain a rough view of the point [you are] making,” I don’t think that this is true – either one gets the whole idea or one gets nothing. Do you see my point?

Greetings, Gerhard
Dear Gerhard,

This has been a hot week in New York, and I found myself actually looking forward to your letter. They are a little bit like a cool rain - or a cold shower [I am laughing].

[...]

Incidentally, the title of the book is different from what I wanted at the beginning. In German the title would be "Vita Activa : oder vom tätigen Leben," as this says precisely what the book is about, and hints that there is another vantage point from which to define the human condition: the Vita contemplativa. But my American publisher was unhappy with "Vita Activa : on the life of action" and persuaded me change it to "The Human Condition," which I think does not reflect what I wanted to say. I think some publishers are too obsessed with nice titles.

Sincerely, Hannah
Dear Hannah,

[...]

Let us look at another segment of HC that I had difficulty grasping in English.

On page 13 you list the three ways of life that are concerned with the beautiful. By laying out the manner of being that distinguishes the political being from the slave or merchant you are providing an intuitive platform from which one may sense the special power of the people. As such this explication is rather important; yet it is precisely at this point that I am confronted with a statement that is supposedly intended to describe one of these ‘lives’:

... the life of enjoying bodily pleasures in which the beautiful, as it is given, is consumed; ...

No matter how hard I try, the sentence makes no sense, and completely interrupts the flow of reading. To be sure, an ordinary reader would just say “too deep for me” and carry on reading. But a more confident reader would question whether what is on the page is what you meant; communication between you and the reader will have been compromised!

Gruss, Gerhard
Dear Gerhard,

[...]

With regard to the passage, the point I wish to make is as follows: "...das Leben, das in Genuß und Verzehr des körperlichen Schönen dahingehet;..." I am quite happy with the way that I have written it in English, and I disagree that it makes no sense. In any case it is a complicated idea, maybe I should explain it better.

[...]
Dear Hannah

[...] When I read your German version of that passage, the concepts bear absolutely no resemblance to your English, and I do not know what to make of this. Let us compare them:

**Original English:** “...the life of enjoying bodily pleasures in which the beautiful, as it is given, is consumed;...”

**Your German:** “…das Leben, das in Genuss und Verzehr des körperlichen Schön en dahingeht;...”

**My translation:** “…the life that, in the process of enjoying and consuming the ‘body beautiful,’ passes by (fades away, disappears);...”

Where the German version makes complete sense, the original English is unintelligible, since the verb that relates to ‘life’ is completely missing. It is clear that ‘dahingehen’ (literally, ‘going by’) refers to “das Leben” (life) passing by, dying, disappearing, fading away, etc. The phrase ‘des körperlichen Schön en’ has meaning if it is rendered, in this context, as ‘the body beautiful;’ it definitely does not mean, as you have it, ‘bodily pleasures.’

Parsing the German sentence yields “das Leben … das dahingeht,” which translates into “the life … that passes.” You are clearly referring to the transience of that kind of life (of the three) that disappears as one is submerged in the enjoyment of the physical senses. In the English one misses this concept, and what should have been a simple statement is now incoherent.

Yours, Gerhard
Dear Gerhard,

Your translation is quite correct, and I see that the English is somewhat less convincing. But much of what you say in terms of grammar is unclear to me. Are you telling me that I am making grammatical errors that I am unaware of?

[...]

Liebe Grüße, Hannah
My dear Hannah

[...] With regard to what you are aware of in your English grammar, I think you have hit the nail on the head. There seem to be subtle aspects of language that are hidden from one who doesn’t learn it in childhood. Having learned English from the age of seven, when my family emigrated from Germany to Canada, my English is better (due to the second-language effect) than that of most native speakers. You probably cannot sense immediately when some English phrasing is inappropriate.

After you discuss the traditional distinction between the ‘unquiet’ *vita activa* and the ‘quiet’ *vita contemplativa*, you seem to make the case for a *vita activa* that is not completely bereft of the intellectual functions of thinking and reasoning. In the process, you would also like to de-privilege somewhat the *vita contemplativa*. In your closing comment of Chapter 2, you say:

[my] use of the term *vita activa* presupposes that the concern underlying all its activities is not the same as and is neither superior nor inferior to the central concern of the *vita contemplativa*.

This is clear enough, but one has to get there through an impenetrable thicket of opaque phrasing. For example, what should I take from the following statement on pages 16-17:

If, therefore, the use of the term *vita activa*, as I propose it here, is in manifest contradiction to the tradition, it is because I doubt not the validity of the experience underlying the distinction but rather the hierarchical order inherent in it from its inception.

Please let me know what you really meant to say. [...]
Dear Gerhard,

Here is the German version of that passage.

Wenn daher meine Aneignung des Begriffs Vita activa in offenkundigem Widerspruch zur Tradition steht, so nicht, weil ich die Gültigkeit der Erfahrungen, die zu der Unterscheidung zwischen einer Vita activa und einer Vita contemplativa führen, bezweifele; woran ich zweifele, ist vielmehr lediglich die hierarchische Ordnung, die dieser Unterscheidung von Anfang an anhaftete.

Ich hoffe Du kannst damit etwas anfangen. 46

Gruss, Hannah

46 I hope you can do something with this.
My dear Hannah

[...] I hate to say this, but the passage in question is unnecessarily tortuous even in German, and several phrases required careful thought. I have provisionally come up with this translation:

If, therefore, my use of the concept *vita activa* stands in manifest contradiction to the traditional use of the term [you cannot say ‘in manifest contradiction to the tradition’], it is not because I doubt the validity of the experiences that lead to a distinction between a *vita activa* and a *vita contemplativa*; my misgivings concern the hierarchical relationship [i.e., that the *vita contemplativa* is by definition superior to the *vita activa*] which has been attached to this distinction from the beginning.

The difference in readability between the two sentences is dramatic – as you can see, the extreme succinctness of the published English (repeated below) is impossible to understand:

“If, therefore, the use of the term vita activa, as I propose it here, is in manifest contradiction to the tradition, it is because I doubt not the validity of the experience underlying the distinction but rather the hierarchical order inherent in it from its inception.”

(underlining added to show problematic phrasing; the emphasized ‘not’ is in the original)

Use of the definite article must be accompanied, implicitly or explicitly, by an indication of which tradition is being invoked. It is incorrect, in English, to refer to ‘the tradition,’ when you mean it more generically, i.e., to refer to ‘the traditional use’ – note that you could have left out the definite article and say ‘in manifest contradiction to tradition’. I admit that this is a subtlety, but the mind of the English reader will pounce on this and recognize an error.

Also, the positioning of the ‘not’ in the clause “it is because I doubt not the validity” is completely misleading in English. It is not the same as saying “it
is not because I doubt the validity.” The predicate referred to by the ‘not’ has to be stipulated more clearly, it is either ‘is’ or ‘doubt.’ Furthermore, in the last sentence, the pronouns *it* and *its* are left without obvious referents, making the statement completely ambiguous. Finally, an awkwardness arises from your implicit use of the verb ‘to doubt’ when the parsed sentence says “but rather I doubt …the hierarchical order….” While it is perfectly appropriate to ‘doubt the validity’ of something; it is less acceptable to go on to say that you doubt the hierarchical order itself – one doesn’t doubt it *per se*, so much as one may have doubts or misgivings about it. As an example, when I say “I have doubts about that person,” it implies having misgivings about someone. To say “I doubt that person” means something quite different – it impugns the person’s veracity. Thus, your ‘having doubts about’ a hierarchical order is not equivalent to your ‘doubting’ it. The statement is simply unacceptable to the English reader, resulting in a lack of confidence in your overall proposal.

I am fully aware that these issues of mine might seem to be minutiae. However, I am convinced that even the smallest thing that disturbs, ultimately destroys the reader’s willingness to examine the writer’s argument and becomes an obstacle to the effectiveness of the text, and hence of the respective ideas. I believe it is a matter deserving attention. […]

Greetings, Gerhard
Dear Gerhard,

[...] With regard to your picking on minutiae, I couldn't agree more. You certainly do go on and on about minor things. But I also agree that any unnecessary barrier to understanding can be a barrier to continued reading, and is undesirable for that reason.

When I read these passages again now, I see that the way I communicate my ideas in English is often not clear enough. I certainly agree that this the case for naive students who do not know my work. I am not sure how we should proceed from here. Do we really need to plough through HC in this piecemeal fashion? Should I, as we discussed earlier, publish an improved edition of HC?

[...]  

Gruss, Hannah

END OF EPISTOLARY
A failure in communication

'When I use a word,' Humpty Dumpty said, in a rather scornful tone, 'it means just what I choose it to mean – neither more nor less' (Carroll, 1871, Chapter VI).47

Comparing the German with the English texts in the Epistolary yields insight into the problem. Like Humpty Dumpty, Arendt seems, initially at least, to insist that the words she uses mean ‘what she chooses them to mean – neither more nor less.’ Her writing style seeks to empower single words of her choosing; and, instead of aiding the reader by conceding the frailty of words, and then carefully explaining and circumscribing her usage, she commits the same error of literary judgement that guides Humpty Dumpty. This single aspect of her writing ushers in the spectacular failure of communication between Arendt and her readers that I am describing herein.

It is hard to understand, but Arendt has not been called to account for her linguistic blunders. Perhaps it is because most English-speaking Arendt scholars did not read her in German, and were therefore not aware of the possibility that she meant something else entirely. The misleading use of work, appearing as it does on the first page of the book, already establishes a solid foundation upon which the growing failure in communication between reader and author is then built – a structure that grows as (or if) the reader attempts to deal with the remainder of the book.
Ironically, one writer actually has the temerity to compliment Arendt on her terminological clarity. Pat Duffy Hutcheon, a prominent Canadian academic, said, in a conference presentation: “I came to the conclusion that Hannah Arendt's great contribution to social science was her clarification of key concepts....”

Hutcheon goes on to comment on Arendt's careful use of language in *On Violence* (Arendt, 1970a):

I was immediately intrigued by *Arendt's emphasis on the importance of maintaining meaningful distinctions* among the concepts of “power”, “strength”, “force”, “violence” and “authority” -- and on the need to employ the word “revolution” sparingly and concisely. She felt that the popular tendency to confuse all these terms “not only indicates a certain deafness to linguistic meanings, which could be serious enough, but it also has resulted in a kind of blindness to the realities they correspond to.”

* I have had occasion many times since my first encounter with Arendt to mark how carelessness and ambiguity in the use of words both indicates and breeds fuzziness in thinking. This is dangerous in any context, but it can be downright catastrophic in a social science.  


Hutcheon sees “carelessness in the use of words” as revealing a lack of intellectual clarity, yet fails, due, I suspect, to her monolinguality, to recognize the extent to which Arendt herself lacked semantic and grammatical clarity. Surely someone who uses the English language as carelessly as does Arendt can hardly be accused of “maintaining meaningful distinctions among...concepts.” In actual fact, I have shown above that she fails, in the opening passages of the book, to

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47 http://www.sabian.org/Alice/lgchap06.htm
48 A paper presented by Pat Duffy Hutcheon at a conference of the Research Committee on the History of Sociology (International Sociological Association) at Amsterdam in May, 1996.
49 http://patduffyhutcheon.com/Papers%20and%20Presentations/arendt.htm
convey even a modest level of either terminological or conceptual clarity. Indeed, one is inclined to question the actual clarity which Arendt is presumed, by Hutcheon, to impose on the use of the concepts of “power,” “strength,” “force,” “violence,” and “authority” in the above-mentioned work. My cursory examination of the definitions put forward by Arendt in *On Violence* are very indicative of the Humpty Dumpty approach to semantic clarity. I will not, however, pursue this avenue of thought in this document.

There is also another problem: My revelation, to wit, that what Arendt wrote in English often bears little resemblance to the German (and much more coherent) version of the same work, is not guaranteed a welcome reception. If the inability to make sense of her more obscure pronouncements had left English-speaking readers *unsure* as to what it was that Arendt really meant, this uncertainty would at least have allowed for questions to be raised – something that might have led to subsequent clarification. But there is a strange dearth of academic uncertainty about Arendt’s English – leading me to suspect that many feel, or claim to feel, comfortable with her malapropisms. In addition, some Arendt supporters may go so far as to jump to her defence – arguing that Arendt meant what she said in English, or perhaps, if there is indeed a difference between her English and German texts, that she changed her mind, and thus her wording, after authoring the former.
This possibility forces me to be emphatic in my assertion that the comparison of her German and English texts clearly reveals errors of translation, not merely slight differences in interpretation. Although her grammar was faulty, Hutcheon had it partly right: “carelessness and ambiguity in the use of words both indicates [sic] and breeds [sic] fuzziness in thinking.” Ironically, she failed to recognize that Arendt herself was guilty of this.

The best way to understand the predicament with which Arendt burdens the discourse about la condition humaine is by examining why she creates the problematic triad of labour, work, and action in the first place. What was her objective in partitioning human activities in this way? The following section will attempt to address this question.
Arendt laments phronesis' fall from grace

Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge?
Where is the knowledge we have lost in information?

T. S. Eliot, The Rock (1934)

As an instructor of applied computer science, I have made it a professional goal to stay on top of trends and policies that support the increasingly malignant intrusion of information technology into the lives of citizens. I have no trouble, therefore, understanding T. S. Eliot when he deplores the decline of wisdom due to an increasing focus on know-how and on information (the latter is today mostly in an invisible and singularly dangerous form – digital information). Knowledge and understanding seem no longer to be of paramount importance. It has been said that "it doesn’t matter what you know, as long as you know where to find the information." This represents a tragic decline in importance of those things that, like reflection and careful deliberation, take time; the decline, if it continues to its logical conclusion, will pose a real threat to humanity. Eliot might have joined the Athenians in vigorously debating the nature of phronesis (wisdom) and techne (technical know-how), the two mental faculties that support, respectively, praxis (acting) and poiesis (making). Hannah Arendt, concerned with the emergence of totalitarian thinking in the U.S., would have agreed with Eliot, and wanted to

50 My view of these matters as they relate to information technology is discussed in another document (Brauer, 1998).
warn her readers about the risks involved in allowing technical knowledge to replace wisdom in the value systems of twentieth century citizens.

Deferring to the terminology used by Plato and Aristotle, Arendt partitions into three groups all human activities that occur in the *vita activa*. Arendt then explains to her readers the urgent need to elevate *action* over *work*—using her terminology. Although I challenge Arendt’s choice of words (labour, work, and action), they are used, for clarity, to head up the following categorization:

1. **LABOUR**: those activities that involve *working* (toiling, labouring, etc.) purely to sustain life itself; Greek: *ponein*; German: *Arbeiten*;
2. **WORK**: those activities that involve *making* (fabricating, creating, etc.) durable things to facilitate life by means of the artificial world; Greek: *poiesis*; German: *Herstellen*; and
3. **ACTION**: those activities that involve *acting* (doing, dealing, etc.) so as to improve life and the human condition; Greek: *praxis*; German: *Handeln*.

Arendt needs this categorization primarily because she wants to give a special rank to *praxis*, the human activity that, in German, she calls *Handeln*. Under the umbrella word of *action*, Arendt wishes to collect all wisdom-empowered activities, to which she then links her concept of natality with its possibility of new beginnings in the form of innovative deeds.

Arendt goes on to describe the mental requirements for the three types of activity. The requirement for action is practical wisdom or *phronesis*. It was of great concern to Hannah Arendt that *praxis*, in the sense of open-ended and
unpredictable action, and its prerequisite, phronesis, were being de-emphasized, even denigrated, in 20th century civil society. She was especially concerned that, besides being (predictably) suppressed by totalitarian regimes, political action was being voluntarily supplanted in the citizens’ priorities by the more banal, and very much output-driven, activity of making.

The ubiquitous pre-eminence of poiesis and techne in twenty-first century western societies is readily seen in the manic preoccupation with economic growth, productivity, efficiency, competitive advantage, return on investment, etc. – all at the expense of concepts like excellence, authenticity, honest workmanship, mastery, fidelity, etc. This may also be seen in the case of present-day universities that seem to value technical skills (as opposed to rhetorical and philosophical ones), high grades (as opposed to evidence of conceptual mastery), coverage of assigned material (as opposed to growth in understanding), etc. In fact, one might well ask ‘where is the search for deeper understanding that, in the past, used to drive the pursuit of a higher education?’ Today, the university’s heavy focus on relevance and on the anti-intellectual techne and poiesis reveals the denigration of phronesis and praxis, both of which are necessary for eudaemonia.

This debate is also of interest to Joseph Dunne, who explains (with regard to his book Back to the Rough Ground: ‘Phronesis’ and ‘Techne’ in Modern Philosophy and in Aristotle) the situation as follows:
Chapter 3 brings us to a confrontation with the limits of technique in the field of politics. Hannah Arendt's book *The Human Condition* tries to show that the tradition of political thought in the West, beginning with ruthless clarity in Plato's writings and deriving an irresistible impetus from the rise of the modern bureaucratic state, has canonized 'making', [sic] at the expense of 'action', [sic] as the prototype of political activity. The maker – be it builder, cobbler or carpenter – operates within a framework which, when he gets it right, assures him stability, reliability, and predictability in the execution of his task. (1993, p. 12)

Arendt was also concerned about the disappearance of public spaces and public debate, as this signified for her the cessation of philosophical musing and thus heralded a dangerous public nonchalance concerning the threat of totalitarianism. In Arendt's opinion, the confusion of values and the fear of heterogeneity that characterized the beginning of the twentieth century were directly responsible for the decline of public discourse. This is described in a very accessible encyclopedic essay by Majid Yar (2006), which states that

> [f]or Arendt, the popular appeal of totalitarian ideologies with their capacity to mobilize populations to do their bidding, rested upon the devastation [between 1914 and 1930s] of ordered and stable contexts in which people once lived.

Her experiences of two world wars and a world-wide depression had made Arendt realize that the "amenability...to totalitarian ideas was the consequence of a series of pathologies that had eroded the public or political realm as a space of liberty and freedom" (ibid.). The erosion of the public realm and the concomitant decline of a focus on political action, as opposed to either work (not Arendt's version) or fabrication, were of major concern to her and, in *The Human Condition*, she attempted to describe in detail the problem regarding the decline of phronesis.
If, according to the above observations, the demise of such debates is due to historic events, there are also other grounds for the decline of wide-spread engagement with philosophical matters. These have to do with the inability of readers in the English-speaking world to gain access to the ideas contributed by social philosophers who wrote in languages other than English. It is a central theme of my thesis that this inability is due to the low readability of some translated texts.

Arendt’s mission was encapsulated perfectly by political writer Joe Klein, the author of *Primary Colors*, when he recently asked a penetrating question during a CBC Radio One interview concerning his most recent book on a very Arendtian topic (Klein, 2006): “Is the public ready to become citizens again?” If any single statement captures the heart of Arendt’s plaint (she might have worded it as: “Is the social ready to become the public again?”), it is this poignant appeal made by a political reporter.

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Arendt mistranslates poiesis as work

As pointed out earlier, Arendt’s use of work to represent poiesis reveals a major problem with regard to the readability of her work. Herself a Greek scholar and conversant with the writings of Plato (1997) and Aristotle (1985), Arendt was obviously familiar with the distinction between working (as labour) and making (as fabrication) that the two Athenians deal with in, respectively, the Charmides chapter of the Dialogues (163b ff.) and Book VI of the Nicomachean Ethics (sections 6.3 and 6.4). Examination of The Human Condition in light of these two texts reveals that where, in German, Arendt’s Herstellen accurately reflects what the ancient Greeks call poiesis (i.e., to make, produce or create), her use of the word work does not.

Plato has his protagonists discuss the need for a distinction between making (poiesis) and acting (praxis), and between making and working (ponein). In an important exchange between Socrates and Critias, Critias credits the Greek poet Hesiod as having pointed out that

work is no disgrace...[Hesiod] supposed making to be something other than doing and working, and that a ‘made’ or created thing became a disgrace when it was not accompanied by the admirable, but that work is never any sort of disgrace. (1997, 163b, p. 649ff.)

Critias argues that Hesiod would not have equated the terms work and do, two terms that Critias agrees should describe activities distinct from each other and also distinct from make. The discussion is fully compatible with Arendt’s position, yet where the Greeks are eloquent and informative, Arendt confuses the issue by translating poiesis as work, instead of as production or making, which
would then have been fully consistent with Platonic and Aristotelian usage. This is puzzling, coming as it does from a scholar who was intimately familiar with the works of these two Greeks.

I argue that the gerund *Herstellen* (making) cannot under any circumstances be translated simply as ‘work.’ The most immediate evidence for this is easily available to the monolingual reader by reference to dictionaries: neither the gerund nor the verb infinitive *herstellen*\(^{52}\) are ever translated as ‘working’ or ‘to work,’ they are correctly translated (only) as the respective forms of ‘to make,’ ‘to fabicate,’ ‘to prepare,’ ‘to produce,’ ‘to manufacture,’ ‘to confect,’ ‘to establish,’ and ‘to fashion.’ In no dictionary I have consulted is the verb ‘to work’ included in the list. By translating with the dictionary in the other direction, one can translate ‘work’ into German. This also reveals a great many options but, again, *herstellen* is not one of them.

The answer to my question, ‘What *was* Arendt thinking?’, lies in the word ‘work’ itself. What if Arendt made an error in misusing the form of the word? Let us consider for a moment that human beings engage in the three aforementioned kinds of activity, toiling, making, and acting, and that the output of each of these gerunds can be represented by a common noun. ‘Toiling’ would be represented by ‘toil’ or ‘labour,’ ‘making’ would be represented by ‘fabricated things’ or ‘works,’ and ‘acting’ would be represented by ‘actions.’ Arendt, who was

\(^{52}\) verbs, unlike gerunds, are not capitalized in German
obviously not aware of this limitation on the meaning of the word ‘works,’ incorrectly replaced it with ‘work.’

An example will elucidate this argument: It makes sense to say “He found work of high quality,” the implication being that he found a good job. One might also say: “He found works of high quality,” meaning that the chap in question uncovered valuable pieces of art or handicraft. Failing to understand this and similar distinctions, Arendt made her initial, and significant, error. Failing to engage an editor, who would have spotted these flaws, was Arendt’s second major error. But, accepting Arendt’s poor English as though it were merely a matter of style is perhaps the greater error – one that is being committed by academics all over the English-speaking world.

Careful examination of the respective passages suggests that the triad of gerunds, ‘working,’ ‘making,’ and ‘acting’ would be more correct and certainly more coherent. The clear and useful distinctions among ‘working for an employer,’ ‘making something that endures,’ and ‘acting to achieve a political end,’ suggest that this wording comes a lot closer to what Arendt really meant to say, than does her use of labour, work, and action. Further examination of the awkward triad yields still more insight into the problem.

The distinction between Arbeite and Werk (the noun equivalent of work as in work of art) and between arbeiten and herstellen (verbs) is extremely important, and in
Vita activa Arendt chastises Marx for ignoring it (Arendt, 1960, pp. 98-160). Why, then, is the matter so confused in her English presentation (Arendt, 1958c, pp. 79-135)? The verb *herstellen* can only be rendered in English as to make, to fabricate, or to manufacture, etc., it cannot be translated as *to work*. Then, and only then, does the *Arbeiten* vs. *Herstellen* distinction make sense.

But, as already mentioned, the mistake must not be laid solely at the feet of Arendt. Some culpability also rests with academics. A significant clue to how some have dealt with Arendt’s terminology is provided by Dunne (1993, pp 88-103). In his *Introduction*, Dunne contrasts the difficult writing of Habermas and Gadamer with that of Arendt in *The Human Condition*, stating that she “very deliberately wrote for the general reader” (1993, p. 13). The truth of the matter, however, is that Arendt does nothing of the sort.

Obscurity is, of course, not always avoidable, as one has to make allowances for the requirements of *technicality* in certain kinds of writings. Dunne (1993, p. 13) observes that both Gadamer and Habermas evince technical difficulty in their writing, which he qualifies as “a kind of technicality which need not be mistaken for obscurity simply because it differs from the kind of technicality that prevails in Anglo-American analytical philosophy.” Strangely, he contrasts the difficulty of their writings with that of Arendt’s text, stating that she (along with two other philosophers, Newman and Collingwood) “very deliberately wrote for the general reader” (ibid.). I have difficulty accepting Dunne’s view of the matter.
Ironically, Dunne inadvertently contributes to the problem by covering up Arendt’s error. He stolidly ignores Arendt’s repeated use of the word *work*, and proceeds to replace it with *making*, i.e., he uses precisely that term which Arendt must have meant, but was unwilling to use. Why does he do this? I speculate that, since he knew full well what Arendt really meant, he chose not to draw attention to her gaffe, and simply replaced her incorrect usage with the correct one. As a scholar of Arendtian thought, Dunne would have had no problem persevering to later passages in *The Human Condition*, in which Arendt occasionally *does* use the words *making* and *fabrication*, without ever, it must be added, making it clear that they are meant to be synonymous with ‘work.’ This may be feasible when experienced scholars have to deal with Arendt’s poor English, but students (for whom Dunne is ostensibly writing as well) cannot be expected to have either the philosophical acumen or the dedication to scholarship to engage in such semantic callisthenics.

Roy Tsao (2002) makes a similar mistake in his paper “Arendt against Athens: Rereading *The Human Condition*.“ He himself uses the key words correctly but glosses over the fact that Arendt does not. Tsao’s paper is especially noteworthy in that he actually appears able to read Arendt in German, and must therefore have become well aware of her linguistic shortcomings. Being in intellectual awe of the famous scholar seemingly prevented him from issuing a sharper challenge.
Given that ‘making’ or ‘fabrication’ can, in some instances, result in a work or works, Arendt clearly decided that it would be acceptable to force the noun work to stand in for the gerund making. There is certainly some support for her approach. But, although a certain self-important Egyptian tyrant once trumpeted, in his monumental epitaph, that

My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings:
Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair! (Shelley, 1818)

this does not represent the most common use of the word. Francis McDormand, female lead in the 1996 movie Fargo, recently commented in a TV interview that “when you do good work, you get good work.” While these special usages appear to support Arendt’s use of the word, they do not legitimize the re-definition of a term usually considered synonymous with labour; i.e., an activity necessary for survival, such as “he is going to work” or “he works in a factory.” The alternative usage, such as when we refer to works of art, a fine piece of work, the works produced by an actor, or the works of Hannah Arendt, cannot be taken to stand for the more common terminology. For this we even find support from Plato, when he reports Critias as explaining to Socrates that Hesiod meant to distinguish carefully between work and works, where only the latter, and not the former, is to be associated with production or making (Plato; Charm. 163b ff.).

As Reiss points out: “A mastery of stylistic and grammatical standards must be supported by a familiarity with idiomatic usage” (1971, p. 14). Such familiarity was clearly beyond Arendt’s abilities, and she should not have attempted to render her complex notions in English without editorial scrutiny.
A rather more insidious phenomenon may also be at work in the interpretation of translated text: uncritical approbation. Difficult texts, especially when authored by renowned figures, seem sometimes to achieve automatic credibility, obviating critical assessment of hard-to-understand passages. Chuck Palahniuk, the American satirical novelist and journalist, puts it rather well when he states: “What we don't understand we can make mean anything.”

Opaque or mysterious wording is often placed on a pedestal (where, instead of rubbish, it might be referred to as semantic innovation) and thus be immune from critical scrutiny and can be made to “mean anything.” When it occurs with regard to badly translated texts, I refer to this phenomenon as the translation-induced lionization of text (TILT). TILTing is then defined as ‘the attribution of profundity to an incoherent piece of text that on further analysis is found to have been merely the victim of poor translation.’ The neologism is easily justified:

1) To lionize is, by virtue of its dictionary definition, the only word that adequately reflects the phenomenon.

2) The best antonym of the verb to lionize is to trivialize (“Lionization or trivialization?” — again, this conforms fully to my use of the word.

3) Its usage in a published document (The Lionization of the Mundane) corresponds to the phenomenon I am describing.

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53 http://thinkexist.com/quotation/what_we_don-t_understand_we_can_make_mean/254462.html
54 Chambers Twentieth Century Dictionary defines lionize as “to treat as a lion or object of interest”.
55 http://www.metabase.net/docs/iht/01954.html
4) The role of TILT in textual criticism is, ironically, not dissimilar to its pinball analogy. The implication of Tilt! in pinball is terminal: all engagement with the game is over, finished. Similarly, having come across an opaque, mysterious-sounding (translated) passage, the monolingual reader may feel forced to accept the text as meaningful; on so doing s/he will have upset the delicate balance of meaning-making that should exist between reader and the author. TILT!

By lionizing a text, i.e., by accepting as meaningful purely by virtue of an uncritical deference to the author’s prominence, the reader is instinctively disinclined to exercise the scepticism necessary for meaningful study. In other words, by TILTing a piece of translated text, the reader is saying that “although I’m not at all sure what the passage means, it is probably profound – and therefore something that I will have to accept as meaningful.” Further engagement with the respective ideas is now impossible.

On first examination, TILT seems to be a relatively benign consequence of poor translation. The great danger lies in the fact that, for the afflicted reader, it permanently obscures the author’s ideas behind a screen of seeming erudition. In an intellectual climate already characterized by haste and a disdain for slow and thoughtful reflection, the need for careful assessment of text is never more necessary than when reading philosophy. When, however, readers are unable to read the author’s native language, strange semantic innovations (read errors) will

56 John Sumser (http://www.feniks.com/john/mundane1.html) wrote a piece called “The Lionization of the Mundane” which accurately illustrates my intended usage.
abound, the incidence of TILT will rise, and a deeper understanding of the
author’s ideas will have become impossible.

It is helpful, at this point, to recognize TILTING as the equivalent, in the practice
of reading, of the social phenomenon immortalized by the Emperor’s New
Clothes. Hans Christian Andersen was well aware of the pressure to conform to
the opinion of those in power when he wrote the fable that contains the following
words:

I den store Stad, hvor han boede, gik det meget fornøieligt til, hver
Dag kom der mange Fremmede, een Dag kom der to Bedragere; de
gave sig ud for at være Vævere og sagde, at de forstode at vève det
deligste Tøi, man kunde tænke sig. Ikke alene Farverne og Mønstret
var noget usædvanligt smukt, men de Klæder, som blev syede af
Tøiet, havde den forunderlige Egenskab at de blev usynlige for ethvert
Menneske, som ikke duede i sit Embede, eller også var utildelig
dum. (paragraph 2 of Keiserens nye Klæder).

N.B.: I have to confess that, when I first wrote this, I said (emphasis added):

“Hans Christian Andersen was well aware of the pressure to conform to the
opinion of those in power when he wrote the fable that contains the following
words:

In the great city where [the Emperor] lived, life was always gay.
Every day many strangers came to town, and among them one day
came two swindlers. They let it be known they were weavers, and
they said they could weave the most magnificent fabrics imaginable.
Not only were their colors and patterns uncommonly fine, but clothes
made of this cloth had a wonderful way of becoming invisible to
anyone who was unfit for his office, or who was unusually stupid.

Having written the original (now boxed) paragraph in English, I suddenly realized
that, by saying “when he wrote the following words,” I was making the same
mistake that I complain about – I was automatically treating the translation as though it were the original. In fact, the English words I cited were not those of the author, but those of translator Jean Hersholt, the Danish actor and Hans Christian Andersen enthusiast. As a matter of interest, Hersholt’s version deserves to be recognized for including the reference to “som ikke duede i sit Embede” (‘anyone who was unfit for his office’). Some translations omit these words, thus denying the reader access to Andersen’s timeless message that officials are most afraid of being unmasked as unfit, incompetent or corrupt.

The purpose of my allusion to an Emperor parading around naked is to point out that this sort of thing really happens – it is not just a fable. When a renowned author delivers herself of incomprehensible wording, a common reaction to the meaningless text, by those that choose not to attack the writer, seems to be to assume that it must mean something important: TILT!

The TILT phenomenon is a serious dilemma for both pedagogy and democracy, in that education in a free society ought, among other things, to ensure that both citizens and students not be easily cowed by authorities or prominent authors. At the very least, education ought to empower and encourage citizens to speak out about the failings of their leaders, and students to challenge the muddled phrasing.

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57 The translations of Jean Hersholt (1886 - 1956) are recognized as the best English versions of Hans Christian Andersen in existence. [http://www.andersen.sdu.dk/vaerk/hersholt/TheEmperorsNewClothes_e.html](http://www.andersen.sdu.dk/vaerk/hersholt/TheEmperorsNewClothes_e.html)
of their professors. Textual opacity, if found in a translated text, should never be accepted as an \textit{a priori} indication that it must be a complicated expression of some obscure idea, but rather that something may not be quite right with the translation. The assumption should be that if a translated text is not readily comprehended it is possibly due to an error in translation – and that a more careful examination of the material, including the original, may be necessary.

Italo Calvino, the Italian writer of experimental fiction, offers his readers an interesting view of the TILT phenomenon. In the hyper-reflexive \textit{If on a winter’s night a traveler}, his footnote-situated “Translator” comments to the reader on what might have been interpreted as a clever stylistic device (it was actually only the erroneous repetition of some wording):

Damn!...What you thought was a stylistic subtlety on the author’s part is simply a printers’ mistake: they have inserted the same pages twice (Calvino, 1981, p. 25).

Calvino is implying that something that may in fact be nothing more than an error can assume the appearance of a \textit{stylistic subtlety}. The problem arises when the naïve reader is unwilling to suspect the existence of an error and, instead, accepts the garbled text as correct, and perhaps even as especially brilliant.

The aura of established prowess is formidable, and the best evidence for this is a delightfully irreverent movie called \textit{The Yes Men}.\footnote{http://www.theyesmen.org/movie/} The movie shows how, in the face of the apparent (fraudulently established) credibility of a lecturer on global
economics, a crowd of international executives and bureaucratic mandarins accepted as serious (and applauded) a series of completely ludicrous lectures on national and international policy proposals. The gullibility, in the face of apparent authority, of those who should know better could not be illustrated more effectively or more entertainingly.  

The reason for my alluding to this piece of documentary genius is simply to remind us that such undeserved praise is generally only accorded to those of whom we do not wish to appear critical – perhaps due to our own feelings of inadequacy. In the case of philosophical writing, this phenomenon manifests itself when incomprehensible textual passages are not being subjected to the same scrutiny as would be given to a student’s work. In this way, nonsense is sometimes allowed to pass as erudition or stylistic subtlety. When convoluted language is unwarranted, and occurs due to the inadequate skills of an author/self-translator (as is the case with Hannah Arendt), the phenomenon is hard to spot and nearly impossible to reverse.

Recently, I uncovered a very interesting (and, as it turns out, mistaken) reference to the TILT effect, with regard to German scientists delivering their papers to

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59 To balance this portrait of intellectual malfeasance, it is necessary to say that a similar situation sometimes occurs in exactly the opposite direction. Essays by famous writers have been submitted (experimentally) as though authored by undergraduate students. The low grades often given to these works by seemingly competent professors is a shocking reminder that the apparent nature of the author has a greater impact on the evaluation than the actual quality of the writing.

60 Some convoluted passages are legitimately complex and their validity is not being impugned here.
German audiences *in English*. In the English translation\(^6^1\) of a German newspaper article,\(^6^2\) the German biophysicist, Stefan Klein, was said to have opined, regarding the German scientists' English, that "[u]nusual word-choices and serpentine sentences can make a speech seem more brilliant than it actually is" (Klein, 2007a). This sounded like a perfect example of the lionization of translated work, and I wanted to cite it. But was it really? My inability to accept translations made me check the original German newspaper article (Klein, 2007b). Imagine my amazement when I found that Stefan Klein actually said *exactly the opposite*: "[u]nusual word-choices and serpentine sentences can make many a speech appear less brilliant than its content actually was"\(^6^3\) (my translation). What a telling example, not of TILTing but, of the impact on meaning of poor translation. In the article in question (entitled "Dumber in English"), Klein goes on to lament the prevailing proclivity of German scientists to discuss science, even in German meetings, only in English, and even considers this a threat to democracy—a very Arendtian notion.

Arendt’s insistence on writing in, and translating into English, without extensive professional editing, was an error in judgment, the result of which has been to keep *The Human Condition* inaccessible to all but dedicated scholars. Just as significant, however, was the subsequent failure of academics to question Arendt’s strangled English.

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\(^6^1\) *Dumber in English.* [http://www.signandsight.com/features/1438.html](http://www.signandsight.com/features/1438.html)

\(^6^2\) "*Dümmer auf Englisch.*" Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, 7.7.2007.
Arendt’s English receives feeble criticism

Although there are, indeed, some academics who have questioned the quality of her writing, none of them does so with anything approaching the kind of rigour or penetration that the problem requires. This leads me to believe that TILTING is very much at work in constraining critical examination of Arendt’s awkward English constructions.

Professor Tony Judt, Director of the Remarque Institute at New York University, comments on Arendt’s shortcomings, and gives his opinion as to the nature of the problem. In a 1995 review of two Arendt books, Judt states that:

Hannah Arendt died twenty years ago, leaving a curious and divided legacy. To some she represented the worst of “Continental” philosophizing: metaphysical musings upon modernity and its ills unconstrained by any institutional or intellectual discipline and often cavalierly unconcerned with empirical confirmation. They note her weakness for a phrase or an aperçu, often at the expense of accuracy. For such critics her insights into the woes of the century are at best derivative, at worst plain wrong. (Judt, 1995, underscoring added)

Judt reports that there are those who accuse Arendt of lacking “intellectual discipline” and being “unconcerned with empirical confirmation,” the implication being that these shortcomings relate to substance and theory. However, as in all sciences, errors of interpretation or conclusion merely heighten the debate, while

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63 “Seltsam gewählte Worte und verschlungene Sätze ließen so manchen Vortrag weniger brillant wirken, als er inhaltlich war.” (Klein, 2007b)
64 Essays in Understanding, 1930–1954 and Between Friends: The Correspondence of Hannah Arendt and Mary McCarthy, 1949–1975
65 http://www.nybooks.com/articles/article-preview?article_id=1941
methodological ones (in this case, linguistic) have a tendency to undermine the validity of the whole experiment/argument.

The underscored sentence is noteworthy, as it indicates that some scholars have a problem with how Arendt wrote. But the criticism is feeble, as they had more of a substantive quarrel with her than a linguistic one. I contend that failing to identify Arendt's language problem misdirected a whole generation of Arendtian scholarship. I have presented a case for the view that those who, with Judt, see her language aberrations as stylistic, are getting it wrong. Judt's comment is telling: "For such critics her insights into the woes of the century are at best derivative, at worst plain wrong." When Arendt's English is patently flawed, it seems spurious to challenge her insights as derivative, or even wrong. Furthermore, Judt ignores the possibility that these so-called critics never really understood her ideas, precisely because they never got past her bad English. Judt, himself a native English speaker, likely did not read Arendt in German and would have been unaware that her English writings differ markedly from her German translation of the same text.

Arendt's errors are ones of terminology or grammar, not of logic or judgement. As such they primarily affect readability, not the value of her ideas. But readability is critically important, because in trying to deal with, or act on, Arendt’s ideas the reader ought above all to be struggling with the key question: Is the argument valid? But, and this is the core issue, Arendt’s ideas cannot easily
be critiqued by English-only readers because if they are not fully understood they must *perforce* be accepted as ‘metaphysical musings upon modernity’ – *TILT!*

Judt goes on to say that

[o]thers, including the many young American scholars who continue to study and discuss her work, find her a stimulating intellectual presence; her refusal to acknowledge academic norms and conventional categories of explanation, which so frustrates and irritates her critics, is precisely what most appeals to her admirers. (ibid.)

This conclusion is singularly misguided if those “many young American scholars” were unable to read Arendt in both German and English. For Judt to claim that these admirers somehow share, with Arendt, a disdain for “conventional categories of explanation,” is based on incomplete understanding – especially when one considers that, in the corresponding German text, she does indeed rely totally on ‘conventional categories of explanation.’ It is this very asymmetry in the linguistic quality of the two texts that is hidden from those who do not have access to both versions of the respective passages.

In sum, Judt’s assessment is itself “at best (misleading), at worst, plain wrong.” Blissfully unaware of the discrepancy between Arendt’s English and German versions of the same ideas, he would not have realized that neither the “some” (the critics) nor the “others” (the young American scholars) had access to the *real* (German) Arendt. Judt’s comments imply that Arendt’s unconventional English seems to have been merely interpreted differently by these two groups of readers: the former as “cavalier” and the latter as “stimulating.” Based on the
discrepancies between the German and English texts, this is an incorrect assessment of the situation.

Mary McCarthy, in her June 9, 1971, letter to Arendt, points to the latter’s use of English in a lecture series, the text of which McCarthy had just read.66

Dearest Hannah:

How nice to get your long letter. But first about your thinking lecture. To me it seems all right for publication, though I feel there are too many cuts. They’re of two kinds: first, where you cut qualifying sentences or paragraphs; second, where you cut clarifying sentences or paragraphs. I would restore quite a few of the second category. Otherwise it strikes me as too rapid and elliptical and especially for what you’re thinking of as “popularization.” There are moments when, precisely, because of the cuts the reader is unable to follow the thought process of the author.

I have one objection to your vocabulary here. “Thoughtlessness.” It doesn’t mean what you want it to mean in English, not any more; the sense you are trying to impose on it is given in the big OED as “Now Rare.” And it seems to me a mistake to force a key word in an essay to mean what it doesn’t normally, even when the reader understands what you are trying to say with it. Not to mention the cases when the reader will fail to understand and read it as heedlessness, neglect, forgetfulness, etc. My suggestion would be to find not a substitute – another abstract noun – but substitutes. E.g., in one instance you yourself, page 2, come up with a synonym, which to me is preferable, “inability to think.”

(Brightman, 1995; p. 296 – the italics, including the ‘a’ are McCarthy’s; bolding and underscoring are mine)

Encapsulated in the opening paragraph is the whole problem: Hannah Arendt cuts her text to the bone, eliminating the phrases and sentences that would have helped make her pronouncements a little more understandable. From the very first page

66 This series was subsequently republished, with thoughtlessness italicized, (Arendt, 1977, p. 4) as “The Life of the Mind: Thinking.”
of *The Human Condition*, this regrettable approach cripples her ability to have an impact on the reader.

The underscored sentences in the second paragraph, furthermore, reveal McCarthy’s insightful practical solution to the problem of self-translation: when, as is often the case, a given word cannot be rendered adequately by another *single* word, then the obvious solution is to use multiple words, phrases, and sentences. It is my belief that Arendt avoids this in an effort to differentiate herself from the style of Heidegger, her teacher and mentor, whose habit it was to provide page upon page of nuanced qualification and definition of his choice of words. Whatever the reason for her feeling that she did not need to explain her definition of terms, it was sufficiently compelling to consign much of her thinking to the academic wasteland – well out of the reach of those in civil society who have the greatest need to access innovative political ideas.

The American academic and self-styled maverick writer Carol Brightman made much of the reservations that McCarthy had concerning Arendt’s inexact English. Brightman could have been the most effective critic of Arendt’s language, in that her complaints are provided in her very readable introduction (she calls it “Introduction: An Epistolary Romance”) to her edited book: *Between Friends: The Correspondence of Hannah Arendt and Mary McCarthy 1945 – 1975*. Unfortunately, she failed to recognize the seriousness of the problem and, instead
of seeing the pedagogical and intellectual issues involved in the self-translation of her philosophical ideas, focused on the less important substantive distortions.

The criticisms she did level were, for the most part, on McCarthy's behalf, and did not show her own reaction to Arendtian "disregard for words." This attitude is shown in the following excerpt:

Careful exposition, in any event, was not Arendt's forte; something she knew herself, and tolerated to a degree that sometimes made McCarthy uncomfortable. Her carelessness was forgiveable in correspondence, where her mea culpas for writing "hastily and impatiently" or for delivering "a few remarks in shorthand — perhaps to be talked about when we see each other" could be accepted with good grace. More disturbing was to find her "disregard for words," as McCarthy saw it, in print. A sentence such as "The human condition of work is worldliness," appearing on the first page of *The Human Condition*, bothered McCarthy greatly. With its uncertain use of the word *worldly*, it could not help but offend a writer whose commitment to clear and accurate expression in whatever she wrote was her way of humanizing the wilderness of human experience. (Brightman, 1995, p. xxiii; underscoring added)

Brightman reports that McCarthy once told her that what "Hannah was trying to do to language — [was] a kind of violation that it wouldn't take.” (ibid.)

Criticizing Arendt for her use of the word *thoughtlessness* with regard to a man who helped the Nazi regime commit genocide seems, to Brightman, to have been McCarthy's main objection in that letter. This is misleading. Brightman neglects to draw our attention to the critically important insight that McCarthy revealed, in the letter's opening paragraph as shown above, with regard to Arendt's unwillingness to use explanatory phrasing (sometimes even cutting out clarifying
comments she used in the lecture). I repeat McCarthy’s comment here for the sake of clarity:

My suggestion would be to find not a substitute – another abstract noun – but substitutes. E.g., in one instance you yourself, page 2, come up with a synonym, which to me is preferable, “inability to think.” (McCarthy in Brightman, 1995, p. 296)

McCarthy’s criticisms of Arendt’s use of language, although the most perceptive, were still very weak, and never received much academic attention. As such they were ineffectual. Significant critiques remain still to be published.
Remedial options

Two possible approaches suggest themselves as possible solutions to the dilemma of dealing with Arendt's awkward use of English. Unfortunately, the best solution, polyglotism, is also the most unrealistic. The other solution, slow-reading, is more feasible. However, its deployment will require a shift in academic policies as they relate to making reading assignments of translated philosophy. Whether or not this is achievable will depend a lot on how my thesis is accepted in academia.

Polyglotism – the idealistic solution

The ideal solution to the problem at hand would, of course, be to require that students have a reading knowledge of several relevant languages. The inability of many North American university students to read a text in the original language is a consequence of a general, and relatively recent, increase in the prevalence of monolingualism. According to Laura Florand, a scholar in Romance studies and a specialist in the multicultural experience, this is a tragic mistake. She claims that

[m]onolingualism is like a disease, a particularly regrettable and life-impoverishing disease and one that limits the quality of life in America more than in any other economically-developed country. (Florand, 2003, p. 44)

67 Until the early 1900s, it was considered necessary for university students in Europe and North America to learn Latin and Greek, along with several modern European languages. This policy has fallen into disfavour and, today, especially in North America, university students are rarely able to read the language in which a work was originally written. They are therefore in the academically weakened position of having to accept as given the accuracy of a translation.

However, monolingualism ought not to be seen as an abnormal state or disease, as
the processes of natality, language acquisition, and socialization ensure that
humans have an initial and perfectly natural reliance on a single language. Logic
suggests that we pathologize, not the increase in prevalence of monolingualism,
but rather the recent, education-mediated, decline in the incidence of polyglotism,
an acquired condition that for centuries offered protection against the undesirable
consequences of cultural isolation.

But academic polyglotism\textsuperscript{69} has fallen on hard times. Due to a combination of
revenue-driven policies in academia and the growing global hegemony of the
English language, a university education in Canada rarely requires students to
learn languages other than English. The impact of a graduating requirement for
competence in two or three languages would be financially disastrous for those
post-secondary institutions that adhere to the current paradigm of appealing, in the
interest of increasing tuition revenues, to a vast population of intellectually
mediocre high school graduates. Consequently, the uncritical reliance on
translations of continental philosophy is accepted as unavoidable.

This is, of course, not the case with graduate students of philosophy, as most
reputable graduate schools still require some familiarity with the languages of the
philosophers on whom a student is focusing. But this is a feeble concession to the

\textsuperscript{69} I distinguish between academic polyglotism and migrational bilingualism. The former is a
deliberately acquired skill, whereas the latter is inadvertent and rarely predisposes to an ability
to deal with philosophical writings.
requirements of scholarship. Students cannot be expected to acquire competence in a foreign language in a mere one or two years of study. Had their K-12 education and undergraduate curricula included the study of the relevant languages, their subsequent ability (e.g., after 4-10 years of study) to read original texts would have been enhanced considerably.

Concomitant with the decline of intellectualist higher education is an accelerating default to official monolingualism. Students, but not educational authorities, can be forgiven for thinking they need not take the trouble to learn foreign languages when most of the commercial world is eager to do business in English. The ability to communicate globally, even if only on the basis of the mutilated English called Globish,\(^70\) gives carte blanche to business people, transnational corporations and other culturcidal interests intent on monopolizing the wellspring of power and profit: the near-instantaneous transmission of information. The matter assumes a frightening reality when one reads about the growing interest in Globish, English lite,\(^71\) and Microsoft English.\(^72\)

In spite of such erosion of the English language, educational leaders in the UK, US and Canada seem to be doing little to thwart covertly, let alone oppose overtly, this slide into linguistic barbarism. Too often ignored are the known

\(^{70}\) http://www.iht.com/articles/2005/04/21/features/Blume22.php
\(^{72}\) http://www-users.informatik.rwth-aachen.de/~wge/funny/microsoft/english.html
benefits of bilingualism, as situation, for example, by Professor Colin Baker of
the University of Wales:

Bilingual children have more fluent, flexible and creative thinking. They can communicate more naturally and expressively, maintaining a finer texture of relationships with parents and grandparents, as well as with the local and wider communities in which they live. They gain the benefits of two sets of literatures, traditions, ideas, ways of thinking and behaving. They can act as a bridge between people of different colours, creeds and cultures. With two languages come a wider cultural experience, greater tolerance of differences and less racism. As barriers to movement between countries are taken down, the earning power of bilinguals rises. Further advantages include raised self-esteem, increased achievement, and greater proficiency with other languages.73

Predictably, the benefits of polyglotism seem to be best appreciated by those who already speak several languages. This can be seen in the fact that people all over the world are adding English to their already significant linguistic skill-set. In Germany, for instance, an Anglophone trying to communicate in German, who is unable to come up with a German word for something, need only insert the English term (noun or verb-stem) into the German sentence – usually the statement is understood and accepted without further comment. That this is a tragedy for both English and German is hardly debatable.

But, like many tragedies, this one is not without its comic aspect. In the US, the early history of the linguistic domination of English is sign-posted with a most telling event: In 1924, Miriam Ferguson took office as the Governor of Texas,


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after her husband, the previous Governor, was arrested for influence peddling and misappropriation of funds. Upon being asked to comment on a proposed law that would require high school students to learn a second language (Spanish, in this case) prior to graduation, Governor “Ma” Ferguson delivered herself of this, now celebrated, opinion:

If the English language was good enough for Jesus Christ, it is good enough for the school children of Texas!74

Lest it be assumed that this is ancient history, a recent decline in foreign language instruction has also been noticed in the U.K. where the General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) exams in French and German declined by around 14% between 2004 and 2005.75 It is a sad commentary on education in the twenty-first century that the Ma Fergusons of the western world seem to have the ear of those who govern our institutions of higher education.

While the situation is grim, I hope that a renewed appreciation of an old-fashioned skill is on the horizon. Our failure to value polyglotism may otherwise herald a descent into the self-satisfied sludge that outlines Ma Ferguson’s boot-prints.

74 http://www.houghtonmifflinbooks.com/catalog/authordetail.cfm?textType=interviews&authorID=2401
**Slow-reading – the realistic solution**

Another, and more realistic, way of dealing with the problems caused by poor translations involves two innovative approaches to the way that the reading of translated philosophical texts is assigned in educational settings: 1) examine translation as a practice that can distort meaning, and 2) teach the practice of slow-reading.

The first approach would have individual instructors acquaint students with the nature and impact of translation. To assign students to read translated texts and yet to leave them totally unaware as to what translation really is and can do to text, seems to me to be an unacceptable breach of academic propriety. I will not go into this specific remedy at length, as it is not directly related to what I wish to advance. I can, however, point to an excellent example of how this might be accomplished: Victoria Poulakis, Professor of English at Northern Virginia Community College, decided that she needed to teach about translation and wrote an interesting paper on the experience called “Translation and the Difference It Makes”. In her article,\(^76\) Poulakis says that

\(\text{[o]c\text{c}a\text{n}o\text{s}i\text{n}a\text{l\text{y}, the subject of translation became a part of class discussion. This occurred mainly when a student raised a question about a particularly obscure passage in a text, and I had to explain that in some cases translations simply cannot convey the original meaning. I also told my students at the beginning of each semester that they would be reading translated versions of texts written many centuries earlier whose original style and language were very different from modern English. (Poulakis, 2001, p. 7)}\)

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Poulakis cites the well-known translator Lawrence Venuti, who identifies the dilemma that translation poses to instructors who are forced to deal with translations in the classroom:

The whole issue of translation is really repressed in the classroom....The problem is that academics who are doomed to reading translations in the classroom don’t know how to read translations as translations. (Venuti, qtd. in Wechsler, p. 189) (ibid.)

Venuti’s work itself (e.g., an article penned in 2004) is not particularly useful here, in that his approach to reading translations is most relevant to literary works, where inter-cultural variability of experience and perception, and hence of language, adds a level of interest to the readings.

Poulakis makes it very clear that when teaching from translations it is a worthwhile parallel exercise to teach about translation. Interestingly, she does so using an Internet website that is accessible to anyone who wishes to enquire into the nature of translation as it relates to literature. Given my analysis of Hannah Arendt’s English, I was excited to hear that Poulakis say that

[from my own perspective as a teacher, I found that after students had done the first set of [translation] exercises, it became much easier to mention translation issues in class discussions. For example, when students encountered a passage that was particularly difficult to understand, they could understand my explanation of why and how this might be a translation problem.]

I believe that this approach would be a worthwhile strategy for an individual instructor to pursue, especially when teaching translated philosophy.

77 http://www.nv.cc.va.us/home/vpoulakis/translation/home.htm
My attention is, however, directed not at the individual instructor as much as at the policies that guide reading in general. Therefore I would place more emphasis, as a policy initiative, on the promulgation of slow-reading. For the sake of clarity, I distinguish between slow reading, by which is meant merely reading slowly, and slow-reading, an approach to reading difficult text that involves the use of analytic, inter-textual and synthetic processes. Before we discuss the process of slow-reading, I will first make a case for why I think it is necessary.

The basic argument is simple. Given the inexorable trade-off between the quantity and quality of reading, I propose a re-examination of the length of reading lists assigned in courses involving readings in continental philosophy. The quantity of material that, according to some expert, must be covered is often so extensive as to knock out any consideration of whether or not the material can be understood when read in a normal fashion – i.e., when it is read as though it had been written in English. It is my contention in this thesis that translated philosophy can often only be understood with the kind of extremely careful reading and reflection advocated by Nietzsche (1887), Hunsberger (1983), Elbow (2001), and others. Because this practice, herein called slow-reading, takes a lot of time – much more than is conventionally allocated – a complete re-thinking of policy will be required to implement a useful recognition of its importance. A brief glance at the history of the slow-reading approach is worthwhile.
In his Preface to “Morgenröte,” Nietzsche spoke about “slow reading” (not hyphenated) as follows: [my translation]

I have not been a philologist in vain – perhaps I am one still, that is to say, a teacher of slow reading: – after all, I also write slowly.

[...]

For this very reason, philology is now more necessary than ever; for this very reason it attracts us and bewitches us the most, in the middle of an age of “work,” that is to say: of haste, of unseemly and sweaty hurry, which is intent upon “getting things done” at once, including the reading of books, whether old or new. Philology itself, will not, perhaps, “get things done” in a hurry: it teaches how to read well, that is, to read slowly, deeply, attentively, carefully, with mental reservations, with mental doors left open, with delicate fingers and eyes...my patient friends, this book desires only adept readers and philologists: learn to read me well!

(Nietzsche, 1885; p.12-13; underscoring added)

If Nietzsche exhorts his German reader “to read slowly, deeply, attentively, carefully, with mental reservations, with mental doors left open, with delicate fingers and eyes,” I can only imagine his horror at the uncritical haste with which he is often skimmed in English. Slow-reading and reflection on the writer’s (author or translator) use of words and wording is especially necessary in the case of philosophical texts, where meaning is sometimes hidden behind inadvertently-erected barriers of complex terminology and syntax.

78 “Man ist nicht umsonst Philologe gewesen, man ist es vielleicht noch, das will sagen, ein Lehrer des langsamen Lesens: - endlich schreibt man auch langsam.

[...]

Gerade damit aber ist (Philologie) heute nütiger als je, gerade dadurch zieht sie und bezaubert sie uns am stärksten, mitten in einem Zeitalter der »Arbeit«, will sagen: der Hast, der unanständigen und schwitzenden Eilfertigkeit, das mit allem gleich »fertig werden« will, auch mit jedem alten und neuen Buche: - sie selbst wird nicht so leicht irgend womit fertig, sie lehrt gut lesen, das heißt langsam, tief, rück- und vorsichtig, mit Hintergedanken mit offengelassenen Türen, mit zarten Fingern und Augen lesen... Meine geduldigen Freunde, dies Buch wünscht sich nur vollkommene Leser und Philologen: lernt mich gut lesen!”
Another advocate of slow-reading, Margaret Hunsberger, in her unpublished 1983 Ph.D. dissertation, offers insight into the experience. In a sequence of three lucid and entertaining discussions, she deals with 'reading as dialogue,' 'the circle of understanding,' and 're-reading' (Hunsberger, 1983). All three are powerful and detailed explorations of text as a voice, and of listening, interpretation, and understanding.

The concept of reflection also has a lot going for it, notwithstanding Goethe’s credible suggestion that such an activity is of interest only to the fully developed. But that is, I suppose, not inconsistent with my theme, since Goethe implies that ‘full development’ is the ultimate goal of education. But Goethe’s view of reflection, when applied to reading, requires that the reflecting person feel a sense of equality to an authoritative author. To this end, Peter Elbow offers the student some useful advice:

...we ask you to take your own thinking and your own point of view more seriously than some assignments or teachers ask for. That is, we want you to learn to speak up or speak out when you write in response to the texts of authoritative authors — especially when those authors are writing in somewhat difficult or scholarly or academic language. The goal is to learn to bring your own thinking into a kind of dialogue.

79 Goethe’s view of the importance of reflection was clearly stated when, in commenting on theatrical performance, he said: “Der rohe Mensch ist zufrieden, wenn er nur etwas vorgehen sieht; der gebildete will empfinden, und Nachdenken ist nur dem ganz ausgebildeten angenehm. My translation: “The crude person is satisfied, if he merely sees something happening; the cultured person wishes to feel something, and reflection is only pleasant for the fully developed.” Goethe, Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre, Book II, Chapter 3.

80 Goethe uses the phrase “dem ganz ausgebildeten,” the stem of which is shared by the word ‘Bildung,’ a very inclusive term which is only partially to be translated as ‘education.'
of equals with the thinking of an important published author – to write with authority and agency. (Elbow, 2001, p. ix. underscoring added)

Reading is, in and of itself, a highly complex activity, and I do not presume to examine its theoretical or academic nuances. I will, however, make some observations about the practical reading of translated texts as required in higher education. Not with an eye to adding to the theory of reading, but rather from the position of an ordinary reader or student struggling to understand what the author tried to communicate. Reading for understanding can be approached from a variety of practice-oriented viewpoints. The ones that are most relevant to the problem at hand include slow-reading (Nietzsche, 1887), re-reading (Hunsberger, 1983), reading as transaction (Rosenblatt, 1995), and close reading/text wrestling (Elbow, 2001). I am less concerned with the details of any one of these than with the general question of how understanding of translated texts, i.e., texts that are inaccessible to the reader in their original form, can be achieved.

Unlike the passive watching of TV, reading is an active process. The question is always implicit: “why do I continue to read?” Although the mind’s eye is pulled from word to word and line-by-line by mental momentum, there still has to be an internal incentive of some sort, whether the fear of failure (of a course), the desire for titillation, the need for information, the hunger for understanding, the wish for entertainment, the craving to be shocked, etc. When, however, comprehension is interrupted, the mind’s eye starts to lose focus and skims on until it either finds another eye/mind-hold, or else it just bogs down – reading for understanding has
ceased. Simultaneously, the reader loses faith in the author. This loss of faith also occurs when a text has been poorly translated, thus eroding the trust required for a communication of ideas.

Another foundation of slow-reading is the thirst for understanding that must be present in both the author and the reader. They are both actors on the same rotating stage of teaching/learning: one anxiously holding out the text to be understood by the other who is reaching for the text in the hope of gaining an understanding. Given that the text is fait accompli, the 'reaching for' part of the shared learning process becomes the act that is now the more vital. But the writing itself, in its time, was no casual process, and no amount of casual reading or skimming will ever suffice to close the link between reader and author. Add to this the vector of translational error, and you have ample reason for taking care with reading.

The thirst metaphor is advanced by Alexander Pope, in an effective metaphor for learning, when he refers to a process he calls 'drinking largely':

A little Learning is a dang'rous Thing;  
Drink deep, or taste not the Pierian Spring;  
There shallow Draughts intoxicate the Brain,  
And drinking largely sobers us again.

Alexander Pope - An Essay on Criticism

The desire to 'drink largely at the well of understanding' is one of the most fundamental hungers that can be instilled in young minds, especially with regard to philosophy. I question whether it can be taught but, when found, it must
certainly be encouraged – at the very least, it should never be snuffed out. The need for such drinking largely was probably also considered an educational given by Karl Jaspers when he said (my italics) that

_A little philosophy leads away from reality, but complete philosophy [i.e., drinking largely; GB] leads back to it. Superficial philosophy...may fritter itself away in endless problems, in historical knowledge of school doctrines, in bright ideas, in see-sawing intellectual deliberations – and lose reality in the process. Complete philosophy, however, is master of these possibilities. It is essentially the concentration whereby man becomes himself by sharing in reality._

(Jaspers, 1971, p. 94)

I believe that both Pope and Jaspers were saying “Look, either do it right, or do something else!” Applying their admonitions to the reading of philosophical text, I have combined both of the above ideas, in a tongue-in-cheek twisting of Pope’s poem, to illustrate my view that what is needed most in higher education today is the desire to drink largely at the teat of philosophy:

_Skimming philosophy’s a pointless thing;
drink deep, or not at all, from that wellspring
of thought. Speed reading snuffs the sniffing mind;
drink largely, reader, if you’d truffles find. (pace Pope)_

To add a political car to this train of thought, one of the goals of education must be to create, and subsequently nurture, a desire to drink largely at the wellspring of philosophical thought. Philosophy must be the rough daily bread, not the occasional jelly roll, on the table of every thoughtful person. It would probably

81 Unfortunately, as a teacher, I have become all too aware of the fact that, despite the efforts of many conscientious teachers, the desire to understand is often crushed by educational malfeasance, starting in elementary school and culminating in university.
be beneficial if the teaching of philosophy were the core of formal education at all levels. It is, therefore, especially troubling when an important philosopher like Arendt is not accessible, due solely to error, even in university courses.

If reading to understand philosophical matters is accepted as a prerequisite for grappling with the human condition, then the important relevant texts ought to be accessible for examination and debate by more than the dedicated academic scholar; i.e., it must be accessible to the average reader. That is to say, important texts should be written or translated so as to enhance, not block, reading for understanding. Such reading cannot occur in an environment characterized by frustration, disbelief, annoyance, and despair. When poor translations are allowed to impede the act of reading, and thus obscure important philosophical ideas, it’s no wonder that philosophy as a subject is often avoided as being irrelevant.

The understanding-hungry reader needs, by means of slow-reading, to engage with the ideas of philosophers. This kind of reading will make possible the betterment, by way of reading, reflection and debate, of the human condition. However, the world is imperfect, and the kind of reading that is too frequently fostered (i.e., made necessary by sheer volume and the need for efficiency and speed) in educational programs is, in my view, superficial where it should be

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82 I believe a case can be made for starting to teach philosophical ideas, along with other languages, in elementary school.
deep; fast where it should be slow; cursory where it should be thorough; and, ultimately, fruitless where it should be capable of changing the world.

There have, of course, been several approaches to careful reading, albeit perhaps not as detailed as the proposed form of slow-reading. One could follow William Gass (1985) who recommends the reading of difficult text by reading aloud to someone, perhaps even to oneself. This would augment slow-reading with the cadence of the voice, and thus help syntactic errors and, ultimately, textual meaning to become more evident. Peter Elbow, in his Introduction to The Original Text-wrestling Book (2001), describes close reading as a process in which you

put your attention outside yourself—to enter into someone else's point of view: to read more closely, accurately, fairly, and thoughtfully... (Elbow, 2001, pp. ix)

[and] become increasingly self-conscious as a reader, mindful of your power as a reader, ..., through the process we refer to as 'close reading' – of the text, of your own reader-response, and of the interactions between the two. (ibid., p. xxv)

However, Elbow also assumes that

[the style of [the relevant readings] is polished...: these writers pay attention to the ways in which they choose their words.... (ibid., p. xxiv)

This cannot, unfortunately, be said of Hannah Arendt.
How to do slow-reading

Given that slow-reading of a text is not merely reading slowly, although it is clearly that too, it remains to describe how slow-reading might be done. A necessary condition is an overwhelming desire to learn from the author, to gain insight into her or his ideas. To yield this, the text must be approached in such a way as to liberate from it the necessary kernels of wisdom, or the evidence of nonsense, whatever the case may be.

I would describe slow-reading, as a way of dealing with translated philosophical texts, as consisting of four steps, the first of which is always used. Steps 2 and 3 become important if Step 1 did not yield the desired insight. Step 4 is a repeat of Step 1. The steps and some possible components are as follows:

1. **Initial reading:**
   - deliberate, phrase-by-phrase, reading of the passage *in context*
   - reference to reader's experience and common sense
   - reflection on meaning and implications

2. **Analytic reading:**
   - use of dictionaries
   - analysis of author's use of words and phrases
   - parsing of key sentences into grammatical components
   - re-reading for contextual clues as to meaning

3. **Intertextual reading**:
   - parallel reading of translations of the respective text
   - close examination of other works by same author
   - use of texts about the author or specific work

4. **Synthetic re-reading (repeat of Step 1):**
   - re-reading of passage
   - reflection on new insights and implications
   - integration into an understanding of the author's overall project

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83 Intertextual reading uses a wide range of corollary materials to help students build a deeper understanding of a particular text. [http://www.learner.org/channel/workshops/hslit/session5/teaching/5ts.html](http://www.learner.org/channel/workshops/hslit/session5/teaching/5ts.html)
I hasten to point out that these steps are implicit steps, not formal ones. They are derived from an analysis of the actual process.

**Step 1.** Given the desire to understand, the reader *initially* reads the work painstakingly, i.e., taking pains to get at the *real* meaning of the text. Reading proceeds slowly, word by word, phrase by phrase. If the meaning of a given passage, read in the larger textual context, seems clear, there is no immediate need to do more than reflect on its meaning, its provenance and its relationship to other passages. This will be sufficient to allow the reader to benefit from much of the value contained within the passage. If, on the other hand, the passage resists reading, the first thing that must be done is to read the passage's larger textual environment and to identify the nature of the problem: Is it a problem with the meaning of a word or a phrase, or with making sense of the syntax? The key to this step is the reader's use of common sense and experience with the language. An intelligent reader is entitled to make critical judgements about a text that does not comply with the common rules of language.

**Step 2.** Whatever the linguistic problem, it is important to isolate the larger passage in which the statement is imbedded and analyze its linguistic characteristics. An assessment of the author's *definitions of terms* is the crucial first step in the analytical phase of slow-reading. But, as authors are rarely completely consistent in their use of ideas, it is very enlightening to ascertain the variability a certain author has exhibited in the use of a given term or expression.
Convoluted or lengthy sentences will frequently give up their secrets with *parsing* — the removal of all words and phrases that do not contribute to the basic sentence. In all probability, the re-reading of the passage will now reveal either new insight or fundamental flaws.

**Step 3.** The critical aspect of the third step in slow-reading is *intertextuality*. A wide range of related texts and materials will be indispensable to the person wishing to burn through the fog of poorly translated passages. Translations are naturally the most important sources of intertextual insight. Then the reader, especially if monolingual, might take the problematic passage and, with the help of dictionaries, wrestle with the words in their various languages until they relinquish a variety of possible meanings. When this is done one can begin to ask: Which of these possible meanings is the correct one? The answer will rarely be definitive, but careful examination of the context and overall thrust of the author’s ideation ought to yield a satisfactory subset of options, one or more of which are likely to be better than the problematic translation we started with.

**Step 4.** Having come this far it is essential to attempt a synthesis of what has been learned. The reader will now repeat Step 1, from the position of solidifying his or her hard-won understanding of the passage under consideration. This completes the exercise of slow-reading. An example will be instructive.

A short problematic sentence that yielded to slow-reading is found on the very first page of *The Human Condition*, when Arendt says: "The human condition of
work is worldliness" (Arendt, 1958c; p. 7). The sentence is nonsense; but what is the reader to do? I will now describe what I did.

Step 1 example. Initial reading: First of all, after reacting negatively (angrily) to the sentence, I went back to the textual context – in this case the whole paragraph – and realized that I had to deal with the whole passage.

Work is the activity which corresponds to the unnaturalness of human existence, which is not imbedded 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 this world itself is meant to outlast and transcend them all. The human condition of work is worldliness. (ibid.)

Reading these words I began to realize that the author had a problem with communication. When language does not correspond to the rules of English that the reader is expecting, there is a danger that the resulting obscurity is interpreted as intellectual profundity. If not guarded against, such deference results in the disastrous TILT. Profundity does not imply opacity – there are many philosophers who have been able to present their ideas in a manner and with language that is accessible to the average intelligent reader. Were I to say something to the effect that 'the paragraph fell outside of the borders within which common sense grammatical and conceptual conditions are housed' I would be in the same communication league as Hannah Arendt. Instead, I concluded, purely on the grounds of my common sense experience with English, that 'the paragraph is linguistic nonsense.' This is the critical point in determining the
need for slow-reading. On the assumption that Arendt was not intellectually challenged, I proceeded to the analytical step of the slow-reading process.

**Step 2 example. Analytical reading:** An assessment of the author’s use of words and phrases is the main component of this phase of slow-reading. As implied by the nature of the process, the whole paragraph is re-read, this time with an eye to deciding where, specifically, the words and syntax of the passage do not appear to meet the criteria for acceptable English. The most egregious transgressions against the English language are underlined.

Work is the activity which corresponds to the unnaturalness of human existence, which is not imbedded 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 this world itself is meant to outlast and transcend them all. The human condition of work is worldliness.

Leaving any part of this paragraph unmarked is perhaps unwarranted, but at least that one clause is grammatically and conceptually more or less coherent. To say that “[w]ork provides an “artificial” world of things,” is fine, and only hampered by the inappropriateness of the word work, a matter to be considered in Step 3. Other than that, the clause effectively conveys the notion that a particular human activity (Arendt erroneously calls it work) is responsible for the sphere of things that are of human manufacture.’ The whole of the rest of the paragraph [note that it is only the third paragraph in the book] is incoherent nonsense. I had, of course, already decided this after Step 1 – what Step 2 adds is a detailed recognition of
the specific phrases that cause a problem for the reader. The first sentence already demonstrates the analytical aspect of the power of slow-reading.

Work is the activity which corresponds to the unnaturalness of human existence, which is not imbedded in, and whose mortality is not compensated by, the species' ever-recurring life cycle.

Parsing one of the imbedded clauses of this gargantuan failure of communication yields the following two sub-thoughts:

1) the unnaturalness [of human existence]...is not imbedded in the species' ever-recurring life cycle.

2) the mortality [of] the unnaturalness of human existence...is not compensated by the species' ever-recurring life cycle.

These two ideas are very poorly expressed, to the point of being incoherent. Nonetheless, when one realizes that both ideas hinge on the poorly chosen term unnaturalness (of human existence), the solution begins to emerge. It would appear that Arendt does not mean unnaturalness, but rather that sphere of human existence that is not grounded in Nature, i.e., those things that are of human manufacture.

This non-nature nature of the system of man-made things is, according to Arendt, "not imbedded in the species' ever-recurring life cycle." If she means that the world of things is not tied to, or limited by, human birth and death, but lives on, independently, she has gone about saying so in a most convoluted manner. The second clause, referring to the mortality of either unnaturalness or that of human existence, is less amenable to analysis. How "the mortality (of anything)...is not compensated by the species' ever-recurring life cycle" is still beyond me. The
verb *compensated* is clearly out of place, and the whole structure is unbelievably opaque. It could be considered shocking that students are given such nonsense to read without cautionary comments.

The paragraph’s final sentence, “[t]he human condition of work is worldliness,” puts the icing on the cake. No part of the sentence makes any sense until the analytical aspect of slow-reading is brought to bear. First, the problematic word *worldliness* was stripped down to its core (e.g., worldly). Other discussions in the text were examined for clues as to a range of meanings that the author had in mind. Using a thesaurus, I examined the various meanings of the word so as to get a bead on a better option. Here is what I found: mundane, carnal, earthly, greedy, materialistic, knowing, urbane,.... I now had a clue as to what Arendt meant. She was after an amoral expression related to *mundanity*, the thing-oriented aspects of human life, and was probably totally unaware that the word *worldliness* normally has moral implications.

**Step 3 example. Intertextual reading:** If one has access only to the English *The Human Condition*, Arendt’s use of the word *work* is puzzling. However, when *work* is replaced by *fabrication*, the correct translation of *das Herstellen*, the sentence begins to make more sense. Yet only an examination of the German version will reveal this error. One does not need to be bilingual to sort this out, as a dictionary-based comparison of the passages will soon disclose that her translation of *das Herstellen* was incorrect. Everything was much clearer when I
realized that she was referring to the human activities of *fabrication* or *making* or *manufacture* or *creation*.

A combination of thesaurus- and translation-based intertextual analysis in Step 3 of the slow-reading process yields the insight that Arendt meant to mean *fabrication*, not *work*, and *mundanity*, not *worldliness*.

Intertextuality in the form of accessing other texts helps as well. Carol Brightman (2001) reports that Mary McCarthy was fiercely opposed to Arendt’s use of *worldliness*:

A sentence such as “The human condition of work is worldliness,” appearing on the first page of (Arendt’s) The Human Condition, bothered McCarthy greatly. With its uncertain use of the word wordly [sic], it could not help but offend a writer whose commitment to clear and accurate expression in whatever she wrote was her way of humanizing the wilderness of experience. (Brightman, 2001, p. 23)

But McCarthy’s admonitions were not to bear fruit, and Arendt ended up using the word anyway. Confronted with the English original, the reader who does not read German would seem to have little recourse but to do one of two things: 1) see the sentence as evidence of Arendt’s “refusal to acknowledge…conventional categories of explanation” (Judt, 1995) or 2) realize that the sentence does not say what the author meant.

**Step 4 example. Synthetic re-reading (repeat of Step 1):** A re-reading of the affected passage, together with careful reflection on new insights and
implications, brings the reader to a fuller understanding of the author's words. These can now be integrated into the reader's experience, ready for the next iteration of slow-reading.

In sum, analytic slow-reading will isolate the various possible meanings that a loose interpretation of the problematic passages might have. Intertextual slow-reading will bring on board the wisdom of other writers, the author's other works, and various reference works, like thesauri and dictionaries. Subsequent careful reflection, in context, will sooner or later resolve troublesome words and phrases into more coherent images.
Concluding remarks

My thesis has both public and private implications. A degree of public impact will be realized if educational policies are re-examined; an impact on the private has already been manifest in my practice. These concluding remarks will briefly describe both.

Implications for educational policy

I could wish that my thesis will do more than merely raise the issue of the quality of Arendt’s English. One further consequence might be a policy recognizing the importance of slow-reading, especially with regard to problematic translations. To this end, I have observed two trends in higher education that I think should be examined, as they will impede the necessary changes:

Trend 1. For many university students, priorities no longer include the fundamentals of a sound, if old-fashioned, education: a deep-seated curiosity, a hunger for knowledge, a thirst for understanding, and a respect for wisdom. Today, as a university teacher at the beginning of the twenty-first century, I have observed that the mind-set of many of my students is characterized by five mundane priorities: 1) a preoccupation with ever-increasing tuition expenses, 2) a perceived need for a high grade point average, 3) a lack of interest in the humanities, especially for history, philosophy, literature, rhetoric and linguistic skills (in English, let alone in other languages), 4) belief that a higher education is intended solely to gain access to a secure career, and (as a consequence of the preceding items) 5) an economics-driven haste to get one’s education over and done with. Taken together, these five factors militate against the average student seeking the kind of education conducive to discourse about eudaemonia.

Trend 2. University policies are weighted heavily in support of financial and business management priorities—for competitive reasons, policies are no longer aimed primarily at fostering intellectual excellence. Completion of three-month courses (as opposed to a holistic and many-sided attack on the subject matter), the counting of credits, and written, course-based examinations (as opposed to final oral examinations taken
on completion of the whole program) have all but wiped out the need to encourage reflective study, long-term academic mentorship, and the retention of knowledge for longer than 3 months. As a consequence of these factors, the objectives of university education have effectively shifted from *phronesis* (critical thinking, concept mastery, creative engagement with issues, and intellectual excellence) to *techne* (skills acquisition, course completion, and credentialing). The overall purpose of higher education used to include gaining a better understanding of the world; today it is little more than getting a high (and meaningless) grade point average and obtaining an increasingly meaningless credential. The uninterrupted years of intense study and a commitment to critical thinking and thoughtful reflection, once considered *sine qua non* of a university education, are matters for nostalgic reminiscence – and then only by those few who are so ‘out of touch with reality’ that they actually lament the passing of the classical humanities-based education.

Unfortunately, the ineluctable logic of the case for intervention does not mean its realization is a foregone conclusion. In fact, there are good reasons for pessimism with regard to the likelihood that we will soon see an intelligent reformation of societal priorities that relate to education in general, and reading in particular.

But all is not lost. My hopes regarding, in particular, the ‘time for reading’ issue were significantly raised when I came across an insightful article by Lindsay Waters entitled *Time for Reading*. He concludes his plaint with a plea for a revolution:

> What I am asking myself to do is to step out of the grid of time, to experience works of literature anew. What I am asking you to do is to slow reading down, to preserve and expand the experience of reading – at any level, be it in elementary schools, high schools, colleges, or graduate seminars. What I am asking for is a revolution in reading. (Waters, 2007, p. B6)

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84 Lindsay Waters is executive editor for the humanities at Harvard University Press.
The revolution that Waters would like to see happen in the reading of literature must be broadened to include all serious reading, and nowhere is this approach needed more urgently than with respect to the reading of translated works of philosophy. Although it is hard to envisage quite how this revolution will be instigated, due largely to the above mentioned systemic failings, the extant facile approach to the reading of translated philosophy must be challenged. At the very least, the quality of translations ought to be discussed with students who are expected to read them. Similar barriers to reading, understanding and debate might then become legitimate targets of discourse and academic policy. This alone makes my thesis relevant to educational leadership and policy. It is my contention that academia has been ‘managed’ into a dark night of the intellect. Whether or not we will emerge any time soon into a new dawn of higher education will depend on whether or not a critical mass of scholars and students can beat back the inexorable advance of commercial interests, and take the time to engage in the necessary discourse.

Another possible impact of my thesis might be on the syllabus of philosophy-oriented courses. If poor translations of philosophical writings, as identified herein, are indeed a ubiquitous problem, then the practice of requiring students to speed-read large amounts of such texts ought to be reviewed. Ideas that are not adequately understood can never inform the reader’s thoughts, let alone actions. My project will have been worthwhile if it leads to a debate in higher education, at any level and in any location, on the need for discussing syllabi with regard to
the quality of translations, and for a policy of requiring the slow-reading of translated works.

The political health of civil society depends on reading and debate. But, while a necessary part of *praxis*, slow-reading alone is not sufficient; one must also be able to think critically, to will firmly, and to judge\(^{85}\) dispassionately, to write and speak thoughtfully, to debate vigorously in public spaces, and then to accept the responsibility for, and the consequences of, one’s actions. Should this once again become accepted as a norm for citizenship, the re-ascendance of *praxis* over *poiesis* will have been achieved – Arendt will have been vindicated.

\(^{85}\) Thinking, willing and judging are the three dimensions of what Hannah Arendt calls “the life of the mind” (Arendt, 1977).
Impact on my practice

My practice as a teacher has been significantly affected by my project. Due to my struggle to understand Arendt’s text, I have learned things that have changed me. Somewhere along the line, as my teaching slowly shifted from poiesis to praxis, innovative teachers like bell hooks (Teaching to Transgress), Edmund O’Sullivan (Transformative Learning), and Neil Postman (Teaching as a Subversive Activity) became my role models for a form of resistance or counter-hegemonic education.

Concomitantly, the content of my teaching has seen a declining focus on techne and an increasing concern with phronesis. I now spend less time fostering the acquisition of technical skill in informatics, and more on helping students develop an understanding of the potentially negative role of information technology (IT) in society. My teaching is now less about imparting knowledge of informatics facts, definitions, and skills, and more about getting students to relate IT to their private mores and public responsibilities. In this, I am fortunate to have the support of my academic colleagues, who encouraged my creation (in 2004) of a fourth year course on the societal implications of information technology. All of this derived more or less from my engagement with Arendt.

Finally, having decided to integrate my students’ experiences and knowledge in the structure of sessions, the step became part of a natural progression toward a more phenomenological approach to understanding and debating the human condition. My students are encouraged to explore the nature of their personal life.
experiences, especially as they relate to health and health care. This approach has been especially useful in examining the dynamics of professional behaviour as it relates to the impact of technological change on society. The necessity of an Arendtian action-oriented engagement with such issues is a key aspect of accepting personal (private) and professional (public) responsibility for one’s actions. And, to this end, I have started to introduce students to Hans Jonas\textsuperscript{86} (1984) “ethics of responsibility.” This has not been a complete success, as few of my students have had any exposure to philosophical thinking – but we are trying.

My project has also had an impact on how I read and write. Throughout the early stages of this project, I had to struggle to mount an intellectual argument analyzing, as opposed to ranting against, Hannah Arendt’s curiously incompetent use of English. In fact, I initially indulged myself in writing angry tirades against what I felt was Arendt’s deliberate obscurantism. But this was not a useful approach, and did not advance my understanding. I had to learn that one should cajole, not bludgeon, the reader. Having a tendency to violent language, this lesson has been difficult for me, but I am becoming increasingly aware of my miscommunications.

Armed with a better appreciation of the barriers to human communication, I know that my students rarely, if ever, hear me, and that I hear them with roughly the

\textsuperscript{86}Hans Jonas is a German philosopher who addresses the emergent moral and ethical challenges that come with technological change.
same frequency. But as soon the students and I started to discuss this phenomenon in class, things started to improve. I am beginning to sense the hope and promise of real communication, something hinted at in a seminar I attended recently, sub-titled “dialogue without an end in mind.”

I also began to examine communication theory, and insights concerning the nature of communication as discussed by Osmo Wiio (1978) have had important implications for my teaching. As I restructured my teaching so as to maximize the possibility of actual dialogue, my classes became more interactive and, hopefully, more enjoyable. I now start all relevant lecture and seminar series with a discussion of Wiio’s Laws.

These days I lecture less, resorting more frequently to problem-oriented (as opposed to goal-oriented) discussions and seminars, some of which are explicitly open-ended in that there is ‘no end in mind’ other than exploring the societal ramifications of information technology. Two of the more delicate topics that gave rise to amazingly rewarding discussions dealt with the role that global communication and IT played in the 9/11 attacks and the cartoons of Mohammed fiasco.87

In sum, my practice as an educator has changed – poiesis has given way to praxis, and what was merely a job is today often a source of joy.

Preamble: In philosophy, one often uses terms that have come to us from other languages. This is useful, perhaps unavoidable, when the equivalent concepts cannot be expressed in a single English word. Words such as *Zeitgeist*, *Weltschmerz*, *Lebensraum*, *Schadenfreude*, and *Weltanschauung* are some of the more frequently used words borrowed from German – *phronesis*, *poiesis*, *praxis*, and *eudaemonia* are similar migrants from ancient Greek. These terms have a rich meaning the equivalence of which is impossible to capture in a single English word.

If the single word translation of a significant word is attempted, it should be done with extreme caution; for, while it can often be explained using several English words or phrases, it will not readily yield to simple, or simplistic, translation. For instance, rendering *eudaemonia* as ‘felicity’ doesn’t even begin to give the Greek concept the richness it deserves. Similarly, whereas translating the Greek *poiesis* into German as *Herstellen* is adequate, translating it into English as *work* is simply wrong.

This is where Arendt makes a serious error. Drawing on Plato and Aristotle, Arendt translates their terms into, first, German and, subsequently, into English: e.g., *poiesis* becomes *Herstellen* becomes *work*. Her reliance on the latter word in the introduction, and as the title of a whole chapter, became an immediate hindrance to her ability to communicate with the reader. Rather than thinking through the concepts involved in *poiesis* and *Herstellen*, and carefully seeking an equivalent term in English, Arendt chooses the wrong word and then tries to force it to satisfy a meaning it cannot deliver. Why she did this is not hard to fathom. When it comes to paralleling ‘labour,’ to which terms the Marxist in Arendt was already committed, the noun ‘work’ clearly works better than either the noun ‘fabrication’ or the gerund ‘making.’ The fact that this use of ‘work’ didn’t
conform to conventional usage was of little concern to her. Had Arendt invested more effort in reflecting on the concept of fabrication, rather than on simplistic translation to provide a catchy term, *The Human Condition* would have become a more effective vehicle for her ideas.

What follows, in this *postlegomenon*, is a mini-essay restating, in plain English and without reference to Greek (except for several points of reference), the gist of Arendt’s opening arguments in *The Human Condition*. Because the case is based on my own understanding of the underlying dynamics, I have added aspects to my argument that are not found among Arendt’s ideas.

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Philosophers, both ancient and modern, have long realized that the human condition is constantly being affected by the activities of human beings, acting individually and collectively. To assist them in discussing this, some of them (notably Plato, Aristotle, and Arendt) explicitly refer to a gradient\(^{88}\) of human activity:

- from what humans *must do so as to survive*,
- through what humans *can make to create an artificial world*,
- to how humans *may (choose to) act in public spaces*.

Social philosophers try to understand how these activities relate to the origins of (and critical success factors for) notions such as justice, freedom, and the good and worthwhile life. They bother with

\[^{88}\text{The essential nature of the gradient seems to relate to compulsion > volition.}\]

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this because it is surely one of the tasks of social philosophy to provide the guidance and the tools with which to empower and encourage the action-potential of society, whose members must constantly struggle to understand these idea(l)s if they are to be realized.

In order to examine the nature of those human activities that predispose or prevent the achievement of these desirable conditions or end-states, we might build on the above tripartite split, and describe more explicitly what human beings do in each of those three, increasingly more refined and more public, conditions of human existence.

1) Firstly, humans must *toil* to survive by exploiting and bending Nature to their needs. For more than a million years, human beings have collected berries, harvested grains, dug up tubers, killed animals, and carried water in order to live through to the next day. Today, things haven't changed much. While labouring to survive now often includes tasks that are more complex, they are just as primitive in their function: e.g., people sell stocks and bonds, repair cars, fill out forms, hire and fire other human beings, turn wrenches, dig trenches, march on parade grounds, drive tanks or nails, clean windows, screen applicants, screen topsoil, interview candidates, etc. Such activities can be defined, in part, as driven by a need to ensure *survival of the self* (for, or against, the *other*).
2) Secondly, humans can create for themselves an artificial world by making things from Nature (usually in a destructive manner). Women and men display their humanity by designing and then creating a world within Nature, by chipping flints, casting bronze axes, building bridges and aqueducts, digging mine shafts, designing dresses, throwing pots, weaving nets, inventing bombs, designing computer systems, carving totem poles, etc. Clearly, not everyone engaged in the chain of ‘making’ belongs to this special grouping of makers. While there are frequently many ‘toilers’ involved in ‘assembly lines,’ only those who take satisfaction from, or have a personal investment in, the design and fabrication of the ‘made’ object are, in this scheme, to be considered true ‘makers.’ Such activities can, in part, be described as driven by the need for recognition of the self (in the eyes of the other).

3) Finally, humans may choose to appear in public, to do deeds and act, always in the presence of one another, in defiance of, or oblivious to, Nature. These activities may require that one have the courage to state one’s position on a matter, and can include such disparate acts as writing political plays and poetry, teaching children to be obedient, speaking in public, running for political office, facing down an unfair supervisor, standing up to a multinational corporation, criticizing one’s superior, etc.

89 Attacking the spurious notion that anything human beings do must somehow be part of Nature is outside the parameters of this enquiry.
These activities may, in part, be characterized as driven by a need to recognize the other (in terms of either weaknesses or needs).

But here there is a problem, in that human beings are, out of laziness and complacency, sometimes inclined to focus excessively on the first two activities at the expense of the third - they are more rewarding and satisfy the senses more directly. They are also less dangerous. This has led some philosophers to worry that the lack of attention to action in the public sphere, i.e., failing to recognize the other, can open the door to totalitarianism, not to speak of the flying buttresses of totalitarianism: ignorance, prejudice, racism, apathy, etc. They would say that philosophical debate among citizens is essential if we wish to have a healthy and open society, and if we wish to strengthen civil society's ability to stand up to the powerful and omnipresent forces waiting to be exerted by political, religious, tribal, and, most importantly today, commercial interests.

If the above is accepted, it follows that, in order to analyze the relative importance of these activities, it will be necessary to discriminate between the prerequisites that correlate with, and make possible, each of the three activities. These prerequisites are information, knowledge, and understanding. [For the sake of

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90 [Note: Material in 10pt Courier and within square brackets has been inserted for the sake of clarity.]
symmetry, I augment Arendt’s terminology by adding the notion of
information (Gr. logos) as it pertains to labour or toiling.

1) **Information is prerequisite for toiling** - All human beings need access to reliable information as to what is going on. Staying alive (making a living) entails toiling in an information-rich environment; in other words, to make life-sustaining decisions, everyone needs constant access to information on the what-state of their immediate situation. [The Greeks referred to toiling and information as ponein and logos.]

2) **Knowledge is prerequisite for making** - In order to make things, human beings need knowledge. This is so because making things takes much more than information; it requires know-how, knowledge as to how to make things. Unlike information, this know-how is often codified and passed from one generation to the next. In order to make a thing, the designer, craftsman, engineer, architect, or builder (not the builder as toiler), needs technical knowledge or science. In this respect, we make a crucial distinction between making and toiling, that is, between design engineer and draughtsman, between builder and labourer, between home-maker and domestic drudge, etc. [The Greeks referred to making and know-how as poiesis and techne.]

3) **Understanding** is prerequisite for acting - In order to act or to do public deeds, humans need more than knowledge; they need to understand the why of things. But the outcome of acts, unlike the outcome of making, cannot be predicted or standardized; it is therefore more hazardous. Nevertheless, the socio-political fabric of civil society is woven primarily from humans acting, not very much from humans making, and even less from

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91 I have encountered the debate surrounding ‘understanding’ (e.g., Pratt, 2006) but would prefer simply to advance a non-colonializing understanding of understanding (perhaps siding with Ted Aoki’s views as mentioned in Pratt’s article).
humans toiling. It therefore follows that understanding is the essential requirement for effectiveness in such as playwrights, poets, teachers, rulers, activists, and philosophers. It is certainly more important, and much more complex, than either technical knowledge or information. [The Greeks referred to acting and wisdom as praxis and phronesis.]

[The following paragraph is a further augmentation of Arendt’s thesis, as she herself never explicitly enunciated this concept.]

There is, of course, considerable overlap among the above three subdivisions. For example, the designer of a fighter aircraft is primarily engaged in making. However, the same designer is also a toiler, to the extent that he or she earns a salary (with which to buy the means of sustenance) by designing. Furthermore, when a design is expected to have a socio-political impact, the designer is an actor on the public stage on account of his willing participation in the design of the weapon. For instance, the American farmer-activist and essayist Wendell Berry,92 and Percy Schmeiser,93 the Canadian farmer who, in the struggle over Round-Up-resistant canola, stood up to the multinational giant Monsanto, are both examples of how a farmer can, at one and the same time, be a toiler, a maker, and an actor.

In sum, any critical discussion of the 'good and worthwhile life' must be based on an understanding of the functional distinctions among toiling, making, and acting, and the relative pre-eminence of the

92 "A Kentucky farmer and writer, and perhaps the great moral essayist of our day." -- New York Review of Books
93 http://www.percyschmeiser.com/
latter. It is also necessary to see wisdom and understanding as enabling conditions that promote the ability and willingness to act in public. In other words, we must be careful not to focus all of our attention on making a living or acquiring the necessities of life, nor on making the accoutrements that help us achieve comfort and convenience, but rather on understanding, wisdom and public action, as inescapable aspects of the good and worthwhile life.

But today there is a growing problem, in that information, as well as technical knowledge and science - with their direct relevance to survival and making, and their predictable outputs and tangible impact on the immediate quality of life - are drawing financial and human resources inexorably away from a concern with wisdom. And, most important, this shift may be sounding the death knell for educational programs that would inculcate a hunger for an understanding of the world. Eudaemonia depends on the attention we give to the intangible and unpredictable consequences of public acts. Citizens must not be concerned merely with their own survival or with the making and consumption of things; they must be willing and able to appear in public and act for the greater good.

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The preceding account describes the main issue that lies at the heart of Hannah Arendt’s project on the vita activa. However, where the above statements are clear, Arendt’s wording is often impossible to understand. To revisit my initial point, the best example of this can be seen in Arendt’s statement that “(t)he
human condition of labor is life itself.” This one sentence reveals the seriousness of her deficiency in English – especially when the correct meaning, as revealed in my ‘Arendt in plain English’ version, is so very simple: humans labour in order to survive. With hindsight, the correct meaning is even (nearly) discernible in the original; unfortunately, close isn’t good enough when it comes to subtle philosophical ideas. The very avoidable opacity of Arendt’s prose is inexcusable, especially when her objective was, ostensibly, to influence the action potential of citizens.

But the overall responsibility for the relative inaccessibility of The Human Condition must be shared among several ‘culprits’: 1) Arendt’s limited command of English and her obstinate refusal to engage adequate help, 2) the subsequent inclination of academics to ignore her linguistic ineptitude, 3) the proclivity of university syllabi to confront students with large amounts of unvetted translation, and 4) the rise of the anti-intellectual paradigm of university management. I believe that these four things, taken together, have created a serious educational problem, at least with respect to the teaching of Arendtian thought, and it is my hope that my thesis sheds some light on the situation.
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