

Man in Space: Great and Small

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Nature, Man, and Common Sense

Patrick J. Deneen

While “The Conquest of Space and the Stature of Man” at first strikes the reader as among the more dated of Hannah Arendt’s remarkable corpus, with its emphasis on space shots and the splitting of the atom, in all its most important respects the essay remains remarkably relevant. Its main themes—the question of the “stature” or dignity of the human being in an age of scientific manipulation, the threat of science to the common life and lawfulness of humanity, and the question of the viability of the human species in an era of scientific mastery over nature—remain fresh and urgent. In all its main points, Arendt’s essay is as topical today as when it was penned.

Indeed, one could add that the grounds for Arendt’s disquiet over the nature of the modern scientific project and the threat it poses to the very idea of human dignity have become only more worrisome: her conclusion looks today more like a prediction than a surmise. At the end of the essay she wonders whether a time will come when humans will “apply the Archimedean point to ourselves,” that is, whether we will “appear to ourselves as no more than ‘overt behavior,’ which we can study with the same methods we use to study the behavior of rats.” This speculation seems almost quaint in an age in which human brain activity is measured to ascertain whether ethical decision-making can be reduced to a certain sequential firing of synapses, an era in which human behavior is increasingly controlled and normalized by pharmaceutical intervention. Arendt

further speculates that the effort to reduce all human accomplishment to mere “biological process” will cause all grounds for our pride to disappear, and will ultimately threaten not only to lower the stature of man, but to destroy it. Having since had a succession of authors like E. O. Wilson, Richard Dawkins, and Daniel Dennett strive to explain all human phenomena by means of evolutionary impulses, it appears incontrovertible that we have arrived even closer to the point of destruction of “human stature” that Arendt thought us already “perilously close” to nearly a half century ago.

Interspersed if understated throughout Arendt’s essay, however, is an intimation of the complex interplay between the overt effort on the part of the modern scientific enterprise to displace humanity from a residually religious belief of human significance within a created order—one in which God creates humans to occupy a special, even central, place in the created universe—and the more subtle but more fundamental efforts at the heart of the scientific enterprise to make humans akin to gods. The purported aim of lowering human stature is deceptive, inasmuch as its more fundamental motivation lies in displacing the status of the *grantor* of that special status, namely God. By displacing God, humans—increasingly enhanced in power and control by means of science—can occupy the space once occupied by the divine. Alexis de Tocqueville understood this phenomenon with extraordinary clarity: “I think the doctrines [of materialists] pernicious, and their pride revolts me. By giving man a modest conception of himself, it might seem that this could be useful to him. But they give no reason to suppose that this is so; rather, when they think they have sufficiently established that they are no better than brutes, they seem as proud as if they had proved that they were gods.”

Arendt intimates at this aspect of the modern scientific project with her repeated invocation of the phrase “conquest of space.” The ambition of conquering and mastering the external world of nature lies at the heart of the modern scientific project. The then-contemporary invocation of the phrase “conquest of space” was a predictable echo of the language of Machiavelli, Bacon, and Locke in their repeated calls for mastery, conquest, and dominion over nature. The oft-stated aim of this project was laudable, mundane, and humanitarian: “the relief of man’s estate,” in the words of Bacon, or to contribute to the “indolency of the body,” in the words of Locke. But the project was more fundamentally a critique of ancient philosophic and theological inheritance, particularly deriving from Aristotle and Aquinas, both of whom posited a created natural order

of which humans were understood to be a constitutive part—creatures of nature and God, not its creators. The modern project rejected the “givenness” of nature and sought rather to put humankind in the position of mastering nature—by gaining insight into its operations and controlling its effects. By means of such control, humans would effectively become godlike. Bacon sought to redefine the scientific project as one that would reverse the consequences of the Fall and, as he put it in *The Advancement of Learning*, result in learning by means of which “man ascendeth to the heavens” and achieves that to which his nature “doth most aspire, which is immortality or continuance.” The overcoming of limits—seemingly dictated by nature—was the ultimate aim of the modern scientific project.

Space—seen as the sphere where the angels and God Himself resided—represented a place of special temptation for the extension of human mastery. Where previous ages had held that the heavens were occupied by divine entities, modern man began calling it *space*—a void, or emptiness—and sought to extend human control, mastery, and dominion by extending human presence where formerly religiously mythology, and now nothingness, held sway. John Milton, in his “Prolusions,” summarized this early modern fantasy (of which the “conquest of space” is just one step):

[W]hen the cycle of universal knowledge has been completed, still the spirit will be restless in our dark imprisonment here, and it will rove about until the bounds of creation itself no longer limit the divine magnificence of its quest. . . . Truly [man] will seem to have the stars under his control and dominion, land and sea at his command, and the winds and storms submissive to his will. Mother Nature herself has surrendered to him. It is as if some god had abdicated the government of the world and committed its justice, laws, and administration to him as ruler.

By repeating the phrase “conquest of space,” Arendt is pointing to the early modern project by which the apparent reduction of the stature of man in fact masked the ambition of making humankind akin to gods.

Arendt was keenly aware that the consequence of this project was to undermine the equal dignity of every human that was an inheritance of humankind’s part in the created order, and to replace such inherent dignity with scientific measures of varying human worth. In the essay, Arendt stresses the way that modern science undermines “common sense”: in its unmasking of our shared sense of a common reality—particularly the reality of nature as it is experienced by humans in and through human communities—modern science undermines the very possibility

of equality from which “common sense” arises. By making the status of nature dubious—whether through Heisenberg’s uncertainty principle or Einstein’s theory of relativity—nature is rendered an unreliable and incomprehensible domain. “Common sense” is rendered irrelevant, since it can only be based upon a faulty perception of apparent phenomena: the only form of perception that can now “count” is specialized scientific knowledge. Arendt understood well that democracy, as a political system based upon shared competence drawn from the stores of a common world, was ultimately rendered indefensible as a consequence of the loss of common sense and the rise of scientific expertise. Much of her work was an effort to defend democracy as a regime based upon shared speech and a common repository of history and “enacted stories.” Following such thinkers as Aristotle and Vico, she sought to defend the priority of common speech over expertise and thereby democracy over technocracy.

More fundamentally, the motivation underlying “the conquest of space” imperils the very idea of “common”: the scientific enterprise was apt to give priority of the measurable inequalities of humans over our non-measurable equality. Human equality is not most obviously derived from empirical data, but rather from a religious and political tradition that understood it as more fundamental than any sensory or empirical evidence of inequality. Arendt argued in her essay “Truth and Politics” that the articulation of human equality in the Declaration of Independence was based not so much on its self-evidence than by dint of the fact that it was a truth that “we hold.” By dismissing the “common”—the very basis of such a shared “holding” of equality’s validity—science threatens to undermine the very idea of equality, and hence, the very idea of a single humanity. The deepest danger of the destruction of “common sense” was the temptation of science to dismiss unprovable belief in human equality in favor of scientifically “provable” distinctions that would divide super- from sub-human. Arendt suggested that such a “truth”—even if it could be established scientifically, as was attempted by National Socialists in their studies of Jews—had no place in the realm of politics, or the domain of the common.

Arendt saw clearly the trajectory of modern science in undermining the belief in a common humanity and the religious and political basis of the belief in equality. Her prescience in anticipating modern science’s tendencies toward displacing God and installing humankind in the place of divinity can only strike today’s reader as prophetic. However, Arendt’s own doubts about the standard of nature and the divine marks her work

as finally insufficient to the task of defending against the tendency of science to alter nature and make its standards irrelevant. To the extent that Arendt held that humanity was a creature defined through politics and in history—that our equality was the result of the fact that “we hold” it to be true, and not that it is self-evident by nature—Arendt shared a certain set of modern philosophic presuppositions with modern science. Her philosophic sympathies lay with Kant (Kant of the *Critique of Judgment*, which she interpreted to understand that truth was the construct of human communities) and perhaps most deeply Heidegger. Her critique of modern science’s destruction of “common sense” is powerful enough to point us back to the status and standard of nature as it was understood by the pre-modern thinkers, and especially Aristotle and Aquinas. While her work does not articulate a sufficient defense of a kind of Aristotelian or Thomistic standard in nature and the divine, her writings—this essay among them—are nevertheless a powerful and necessary corrective to our ongoing faith in the power of science and its ambition for the conquest of nature—even that human nature that informs us at once of limits to our effort to control nature and of the source of our human dignity.

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