

Our Proud Human Future

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The conquest of space, from one view, is one stage among many in the conquest of nature, the human rebellion against nature's indifference or hostility to the importance of man or, better, particular men and women. The conquest of nature proceeds with the importance of *me* (that is, every particular me) in mind, and its success serves *my* being—my security and freedom. But the conquest of nature also depends on the science that denies the significance (or even real existence) of any particular being. That science depends on homogeneous, materialistic, impersonal premises that seem to have greater explanatory and practical power than the more anthropocentric views of nature they have discredited. Nothing that we can see with our own human eyes as moral and political beings, according to our scientists, turns out to be real. The eyes of the scientist—the being wholly detached from earthly concerns, the being abstractly and imaginatively orbiting the world of mortals—see us only as examples of natural or, more precisely, universal processes that account for all that really is.

Hannah Arendt wants us to wonder about the being with the capacities for abstraction and imagination. Our freedom from nature that comes with abstraction and imagination—including our capability to make our abstractions real—is at the root of both modern theoretical science and modern technology. Modern technology would not be possible without modern theoretical science, but the scientist as scientist is not concerned with either the great good or great harm modern technology can do for particular human beings. The scientist as scientist abstracts from the effects of his discoveries, and the technologist or autonomous individual abstracts from the question of the truth of those discoveries.

The scientist as scientist, Arendt contends, is not concerned about particular human beings or humanity at all and “does not even care about the survival of the human race on earth or, for that matter, about the survival of the planet itself.” When scientists become concerned with the destructive capabilities unleashed by their discoveries and campaign for their peaceful uses, or when they lecture us on the ecological consequences of our techno-trashing of the planet, they are no longer thinking like scientists, but acting like citizens.

The modern scientist's desire to see the reality behind the deception of anthropocentric experience, Arendt suggests, is actually one that has

always been shared by all scientists. The theoretical progress of science has necessarily been made at the expense of illusions about human stature. But those illusions, arguably, were already thought to be dispelled in principle at the beginning of science. Aristophanes, in *The Clouds*, mocks the scientist Socrates he portrays suspended in a basket above the world, who thinks of himself as detached from the concerns of merely ephemeral beings, even those regarding his own body, which, as an atheistic materialist, he should consider the core of his being. And even Plato's Socrates explained that philosophy (which in those days was not different from science) is about learning how to die—that is, how to achieve a sort of abstracted indifference to all personal considerations, to see the particular individual as unreal. The physicist's demonstration of the reality of the physical world is much more rational than the humanistic poet's concern for the fate of any particular man. Modern science, from this view, is simply a series of breakthroughs in accord with the intention of science all along to become a genuinely universal account of all that exists, one that does not privilege any anthropocentric consideration.

A *universal* science, Arendt explains, is different from a merely *natural* science, because nature itself is finally incomprehensible in terms of the common-sense human perception of lawful regularities. As Aristophanes himself predicted, surely the philosophers or scientists would eventually figure out that even the idea of the beautiful natural order that animated their inquiry is an illusion. The scientists err when they think of themselves as escaping from the deluded world of the earthly "cave" that guarantees personal significance to what mere mortals do into a cosmos which is the home of the human mind. It turns out that even that abstract perception of the mind being at home depends on the mind's imposition of structure upon a reality deeply incomprehensible to *any* human perspective.

Ultimately, the question of whether the success of modern science enhances the stature of man or, more precisely, of particular men is of no concern to the scientist. Carl Sagan explained that modern science was one "Great Demotion" after another of all our claims to excellence or distinctiveness in nature or the cosmos. This cold and atheistic obliteration of all human pretensions, Harvey Mansfield complains, was a cause of the "manliness run amok" of the twentieth century—horrifyingly cruel and futile ideological attempts to replace scientific truth with something else. But the scientist as scientist cannot help but be baffled by all that sound and fury, by so many people who care about their importance or dignity

or some made-up God. It is, as Arendt says, the scientist's "pride and... glory" to be indifferent to "his own stature in the universe or about his position on the evolutionary ladder." It is his pride and glory to show that pride and glory signify nothing.

Genuine human pride, of course, does not come simply from an extension of one's material powers. It is always a form of self-transcendence, an understanding of oneself as more than a merely biological being. The pride taken in the success of modern science is, from one view, really pride in the display of man's freedom from natural determination, in his ability to assume conscious and volitional control over his environment. From another view, though, modern science is rooted in the scientist's proud transcendence of all personal concerns in favor of anonymous truth. Modern progress feeds on the interdependence of these two incompatible views of pride—that of the self-obsessed individual and that of the self-denying scientist. Both forms of pride, of course, depend on abstraction and imagination, and so both are finally incomplete.

Of course, a real criticism of "the scientist" is that he himself is an abstraction. The distinction between the scientist and "the layman"—and so the sciences and the humanities—does not correspond to the whole lives of real human beings. The scientist, Arendt notices, "spends more than half of his life in the same world of sense perception, of common sense, and of everyday language as his fellow citizens." It is only when acting as a scientist that he leaves behind part of himself in his quest for the truth, imaginatively detaching himself from various dimensions of his earthly home to enter into a universality which has no place for him as he ordinarily experiences himself. It is a strange and wonderful testimony to our powers of abstraction and imagination that science has been purged of its anthropological elements by men.

Arendt concludes with the dehumanizing possibility that, completely detached from the anthropological or earthly perspective, human life—even science—might appear to be just another impersonal natural process. Perhaps scientists will come to comprehend and control "laymen" in ways completely incomprehensible to them; then the key common-sense distinctions that separate us from rats will disappear in practice as well as in theory. It is this conquest "from space"—from the perspective of the scientist orbiting earthly life through his powers of imagination and abstraction—that threatens to transform our existence far more than men merely traveling in space.

Space travel itself theoretical scientists rightly consider the accomplishment of mere “plumbers” exploiting certain merely technical features of theoretical truth. Knowing the truth about “space,” our scientists have already concluded, does not depend on people actually going there. Modern science’s displacement of particular human beings from the world of proud personal significance would be complete whether we stay on this planet or settle others.

Arendt actually provides plenty of evidence that our dehumanization by the science discovered by perfectly abstracted imaginative scientists is quite unlikely. Because the scientist as scientist characteristically does not reflect sufficiently on who and what make science possible, a fully abstract science cannot sustain itself. Only mortal, temporal beings in spirited and erotic pursuit of various forms of self-transcendence have the desire to fund science, or for that matter to become scientists; the disappearance of such beings would bring science to an end. Through abstraction and imagination, the scientist diverts himself from “the who,” the real existence of the whole human being who remains incomprehensible to his science. But the scientist himself remains a “who.” He can never, in truth, be reduced to just a mind; he necessarily remains, for example, a citizen, too.

The scientists’ proud and abstract indifference to the stature of man and particular men and women is, in part, a diversion from what they really know. Like all human inquiry, theirs is distorted by pride. Arendt reports that Greek philosophers like Aristotle thought it absurd that anyone could regard man as the highest being in the cosmos. Those philosophers reached that conclusion by proudly identifying their own highest activity with a kind of divine transcendence of human insignificance. At their best, they did not really deny that the wondering and wandering philosopher and scientist—the being captured in the character Socrates—is more wonderful than the stars securely situated in invariable orbits. Plato’s Socrates did not understand himself, finally, as an orbiting philosopher-king but as a seeker located in the “cave” with his fellow citizens—a far cry from the self-denying, self-transcending scientist.

The Romans, Arendt adds, were the first to be obsessed with the stature question, but she does not explain why. It seems to me that only with the influence of the Biblical view on the Roman world that man was—or particular men and women were—raised above the rest of natural existence, even as they were also equally located under a personal God. And modern science, from a moral and political view, was driven by the

Christian insight about personal stature or significance, by the insight that the beings alienated—and not just abstracted—from the rest of nature are both the most wonderful and incomprehensible of beings.

Human beings, in their freedom, use the results of scientific inquiry to overcome their alienation from the rest of nature, to secure their importance or stature. Our efforts have the perverse effect of displacing ourselves further from the personal significance we enjoy in our particular moral and political homes on earth. As increasingly rootless or displaced persons, we are in many respects more free and secure. Still, we seem to experience ourselves in many ways as more contingent, accidental, and deeply insignificant than ever before. We have absurdly tried to make our stature completely dependent on our conquest of nature, and we have neglected the evidence that we are elevated in many ways above the rest of creation by God and nature. Our scientists have encouraged us in that neglect.

The simple truth is that we cannot do anything to enhance or diminish the singular stature we have been given all that much. Human beings will remain as strange and wonderful—and as uniquely great and miserable—as ever. It is part of our stature and our undeniable greatness that we lack the power to make ourselves more or less than we really are. And our ineradicable alienation from the world our scientists can otherwise perfectly explain will continue to be a clue to an unabstracted or genuinely realistic account of the lives of whole human beings. Changing our location to some other planet will have an insignificant effect on our stature in the cosmos. Conquering all of space (as Arendt explains) is just out of the question, so we cannot help but remain (as Walker Percy says) to some extent lost in the cosmos. Being the only beings who truly wander is a precondition for being the only ones who truly wonder; just knowing that can make us at home enough with our homelessness on whatever planet we might find ourselves.

Scientists so abstracted that they cannot see the real world of human beings become irrelevant to that world. Their discoveries will be deployed, but not by them. Our world will remain in the decisive respect anthropocentric—or, better—theocentric, insofar as what we really know about the being who knows and loves points in the direction of a personal, loving God.

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